Ferrari Oreste

For a more prophetic and mystic Orionine family

Retreat for the
Little Missionary Sisters of Charity

Rome 2022

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Introduction

These are days when we want to be in continuous dialogue with God and with Don Orione.

The purpose we are seeking is not our own well-being, but God's purpose: to save the world. To achieve this purpose, He needs us, all of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the first to arrive to the last.

We must learn to listen to the voice of God and of Don Orione, even if sometimes we may not like what they say. In fact, we should pay attention, especially, to those things that we do not like, because they bother us. We must ask ourselves why this bothers me? Would I perhaps prefer to think about something else?

This is an opportunity to discover the areas of shadow in our lives where, unconsciously, we think that the Word of God does not apply. This is a time of purification, of desert.

It is not a matter of forgetting our work, our home, and thinking of an abstract God, of a word thrown down on paper 2000 years ago by who knows who. It is a time to see the past: what has prevented me from being totally for God until now? To see the present: what would my heart tell me, where would it like to go? To see the future: next week, when I return to my usual routine, will I be the same as before? Will I act and think as before?

These are called “exercises”, so the fruit does not depend on the preacher, but on your work. They are also spiritual, so the main actor

is the Holy Spirit who will speak to each of you, but not necessarily through my words, at least not all of them.

At the end of each conference, there are some questions and Orionine texts that can help you, but it is not necessary that you read them all or answer all the questions. If a point, a phrase, or a question inspires you, stop there because that is where God wants to speak to you. At the end of the day, even if only one idea has led you to a small change, it has been more important than all the words you have read or even memorized, but which have not led to any change.

So, what method should we use during these days? Reading and reflection, but not only with the head, not mainly with the head. The heart is the main instrument of every conversion, the intelligence comes in afterwards and takes over the work to establish the best way to carry it out, but the command and the drive come from the heart.

Read or listen and tell yourself that at that moment God, or Don Orione, is speaking to you. What moves within you as you read or listen? Discomfort? Boredom? Shame? A desire to do more? A desire to change something? A dream for life to be submitted to your superiors? This will be your starting point.

St. Ignatius, in the Spiritual Exercises, recommends that preachers (which he calls "guides") should not speak at length, but should indicate themes, give directives, and then, in personal dialogues, help to see if the exercitants are working well, if they are letting themselves be guided by God or by the devil. The Holy Spirit will not work through the guide, or at least will work little, because he will

work mainly in you, in each of you.

The Wilderness

We are here seeking God because we want to be with Him, to be His instruments. Allow me to use the word "prophet." The word prophet, since Vatican II, has entered the daily vocabulary of the Church and beyond. It applies to all those who denounce structures of power and domination; to those who promote the struggle for justice and side with the poor; to those, finally, who, living deeply the experience of God, proclaim the liberating message of Christ in multiple and diverse forms. God needs us to be prophets especially in this last sense: that is, people who speak to the world in the name of the liberating God, starting from our experience of Him. What characterized the prophets in the Old Testament? Normally, before being called, they were simple people; they were not chosen because they were particularly brilliant or strong. They were sent to a society that was turning away from God or that had a particular need for God. Their word is particularly effective because it is accompanied by an austere lifestyle that speaks for itself and by the authoritative signs that God works through them. They are usually not well accepted by the people, and some of them are persecuted, like Jeremiah, like Elijah, some even killed.

In our journey through the desert to form ourselves to be true prophets, we ask some of them to accompany us.

The first character is Moses. He represents the leader, the authority. He had an important place in society and in the Pharaoh's palace. One day he makes a decision that he believes is right, but dangerous: he defends a slave by killing a soldier. When this becomes known, he

loses all favor with the Pharaoh and must flee into the desert. There he makes a new life for himself and thinks he has found peace, but while he is pasturing his flock in the desert, he meets God who sends him back to finish what he had started and desired years before. Before leading the people out of Egypt, and also immediately afterwards, great works are accomplished. The story of the people of God begins, a story that must be built in the desert, where the people must face their weaknesses: hunger, thirst, nostalgia for a quiet place, abandonment when Moses goes up the mountain and seems not to return, fear of enemies. They will overcome all these trials with the arm of God, but they must learn to collaborate with Him and this requires time and humility, which they experience through failure. Moses is there with the people, he feels the same sensations, tiredness, incapacity, but, with his life and his word, he must remain the reference point for the people, to prevent them from becoming discouraged and turning away from God. His secret? The constant dialogue with God where he finds inspiration on what to do, and his love for his people, for whom he often finds himself interceding.

The second character is Elijah. He represents the apostolate. He speaks in the name of God and acts in the name of God. He has done great miracles, more than anyone else. He asks for drought and then brings back the rain; he multiplies the flour and oil, giving confidence to the poor widow who welcomes him. He finds himself alone in being faithful to God while the prophets of Baal are numerous and the people follow them. The king is also against him. He confronts the false prophets and defeats them, but the threat of death sent to him by the queen makes him encounter his human side that he did

not know: the fear of dying. This leads him to a crisis of depression, a sense of worthlessness, of disillusionment. He too must walk in the desert before he can meet God. Until that moment, his style was strength and efficiency, now he learns tenderness and with this he returns to work.

The third character is Jonah. He represents the believer with little enthusiasm or the religious person who lives a quiet life without too much commitment. He is a strange prophet; he has a mission to accomplish but he does not want to commit himself to it. He is concerned with satisfying his own needs for comfort and security, and he is afraid of any danger. He is afraid of responsibility and runs away; his laziness causes problems for others and he sleeps. When he takes responsibility, God makes him go through a period of purification in a particular desert: the belly of the whale. He carries out his duty as a preacher, but he is not convinced. He would like a solution of his own. He has always been weak and now he would like to see that, thanks to him, the strength of God is shown, that will destroy everything. He must learn mercy, and he learns it through personal suffering. The strong events he had experienced had pushed him to obey, but they were not enough to convert him. Conversion comes when the castor oil plant dies, which gave him some shade and relief from the great heat, and he feels the desire to die.

There are many other examples, Jacob who must fight with the angel before deciding to cross the river and enter the land promised to him, Amos who must face the anger of the king of Israel against whom he preaches, Hosea who experiences the crazy love for a woman who betrays him continuously, Jeremiah who is imprisoned

and tortured several times. I took the first three because they are emblematic. While I was speaking, did any of the three stories touch you? Did it disturb you?

All three are willing to talk to God and in the end, after the struggle, they make themselves available. Their problems don't change, but the way they deal with them does.

In our desert we must find the truth about ourselves, or are we afraid to discover our weaknesses? Often it is better to fill our heads with noise, music, useless talks, news. We often fill our lives with efficiency; we are always in a hurry, so there is no time to reflect.

Our vocation is to be in the world so that everyone can experience that God is there, that he loves, and loves everyone, but we must not conform to the world, disappear into the crowd. God wants us to be "stumbling blocks". "Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." Isaiah had said: "In the desert prepare the way of the Lord", not in efficiency, in comfort, in easy success.

When we work in the world we experience disappointment, betrayal, incapacity; we are tempted to fill everything with words. Jesus is truly effective when he is a child, "infans", that is, somebody without words, and when he is on the cross where he says only 7 words. After the resurrection he uses few words that are not of accusation for those who have run away, not of reproach for those who have not understood, but of encouragement. Suffering, defeat and uselessness, become our best apostolic weapon. Heb 2:17-18; 4:15.

Some questions for reflection

- Which of the first three characters touched me? Did it disturb me or inspire me?
- What are the points in my life that I feel uncomfortable thinking about? Am I able to face them with confidence in the future?
- Do I realize that God needs my testimony to send a message of conversion to someone else?
- Am I willing to accept that God will use my weakness, my inability, my fear?

The Vocation

We have reflected on three emblematic figures of the Old Testament and two of the New Testament. I hope they have inspired you to courageously place yourselves in God's hands. Let us deal, now, with the topic of Vocation.

When we talk about vocation, a spontaneous question arises: When I embrace religious life, do I choose to do something for God? Is it something that I enjoy, that satisfies me, and that I offer to God? Or is it He who calls, He who chooses, and I simply make myself available?

Vocation means calling. When someone calls us, we leave everything and go to listen to what he wants. The call therefore demands, first of all, a change of life. We bring our personality with us, but we change our priorities. Our style must be purified to adapt to the purpose.

By changing the purpose or priorities, the way of seeing things also changes, which is no longer dictated by my opinion but by the desire of the one who sends me.

Also, the way of assessing the success of my work changes because now I am not seeking the approval of people but of the one who sent me. If he sent me to change something that wasn't working, I cannot expect applause from people, because, usually, what God wants to change is not material things but the mind, the heart, and this is always difficult to understand.

To work for someone else's plan requires constant contact and communication with the one who sends us, not so much to report to him on what has been done, but to hear his corrections, his projects, etc. This requires that we do not consider ourselves masters, but servants. He is a source from which to draw strength and life.

Here too, we see some characters.

The first is Prophet Amos. He was a farmer, not a descendant of a family of prophets or priests. The Lord needs him for a difficult mission: he must speak to the King of Israel who is unfaithful to the Lord, and predict disasters for him. The King orders him to stop and go back home in silence. He replies forcefully that he does not work for himself but in the name of God. Let's hear his words. (7:10-17) "*Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent word to Jeroboam, king of Israel: “Amos has conspired against you within the house of Israel; the country cannot endure all his words. For this is what Amos says: ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be exiled from its land.’” To Amos, Amaziah said: “Off with you, seer, flee to the land of Judah and there earn your bread by prophesying! But never again prophesy in Bethel; for it is the king’s sanctuary and a royal temple.” Amos answered Amaziah, “I am not a prophet, nor do I belong to a company of prophets. I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamores, but the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ Now hear the word of the LORD: You say: ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, do not preach against the house of Isaac.’ Therefore thus says the LORD: Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword. Your land shall be parcelled out by measuring line, and you yourself shall die in an unclean land; and*

Israel shall be exiled from its land."

His vocation, therefore, is neither his choice nor his family's, but the result of an ability to listen to the voice of God and to get involved in an important task. He would probably have been happy to stay at home and continue his work, but he feels the responsibility of the task that the Lord has given him and therefore, despite the danger, he remains faithful. Undoubtedly, beyond the fear that he certainly also felt, there is the trust that if the Lord wants the mission to be accomplished, he will provide all the necessary help and protection, in fact Amos will continue until the end without falling under the blows of the King.

Another example is John the Baptist. His vocation occurs while he is still in his mother's womb. Our vocation also comes from before our birth. He has a privileged social position, as the son of a temple priest. This was a hereditary position, so it could be his, if he wanted. That would allow him to perform his duties well. He leaves everything, name, financial stability, comfort, and goes into the desert. He preaches there to the few who have the courage to seek him out.

What attracts his listeners is his courage; he is not afraid to demand, from those who come to him, challenging things and to face the consequences.

Everyone would notice in him:

- the consistency of life: he lives what he preaches;
- honesty: he does not keep the disciples for himself, but sends them to Jesus;

- humility: he says I am not even worthy to untie his sandals.

These are his weapons, but to do this he must train his will and his body. That's why he goes into the desert and asks others to come to him in the desert.

When he is a prisoner in Herod's castle, he has a moment of doubt. He is not afraid to die, he knows that his life has come to an end, and so he remains consistent in his message to King Herod. His doubt is: have I done my duty well? Have I served the right master? Jesus does not have the same style as John the Baptist, even though they preach the same thing. This is John’s doubt.

Jesus' response is biblical: he points to the messianic signs that are taking place.

The vocation of John the Baptist has inspired other vocations. Jesus' first disciples were John's disciples. What characterizes them?

- They are not from noble families like John, but they are common people.
- They were inspired by the ideals proposed by John.
- They are attached to John, but they are in sincere search and therefore leave John to go to the one he has indicated.
- They are simple and ask Jesus: "where are you staying?" and they spend the whole day with him.
- They are enthusiastic; the next day they call Peter, Andrew’s brother and a friend: Nathanael.
- They are willing to risk everything to achieve their ideal, even though the transition is gradual.

From the Gospel, we know that they continue to fish. Being with Jesus becomes increasingly demanding, until they make the long journey with him to Jerusalem and from that moment on, they are full-time disciples.

They had the best teacher available, yet they struggle to change their character, to give up their vices, to practice patience and humility, to overcome fear. Anyone in their position would have given up when Jesus was arrested and put to death, but they, although they escaped from the Garden of Gethsemane, remain faithful. Why? Peter gives us the answer: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have words of eternal life." It is love for Jesus that keeps them together despite the big differences in character and even in political ideas.

If we look around us, we often notice that in many religious people, the idea of vocation is losing its character of radical attachment to Christ, to follow Him and conform their life to His. It is as, in their minds, holiness is linked to the works they accomplish, to the apostolate they carry out; it is an external matter. By doing this, an internal division is created where being is detached from doing and the latter becomes the main concern. In short, there is a danger of believing that hard work can establish the meaning of our being, while it should be the other way around: our actions should be illuminated and supported by what we are. We keep busy with many human reasoning and programs, necessary ones, of course, but they leave little room for faith, for the consciousness of being "brides" or "bridegrooms" of Christ.

God does not call us on a path of success, He does not call us to make

a career; He calls us to be provoking prophets, that is, people who act according to God's plan. With our lives and our commitment as evangelizers, we question, challenge, everything that opposes God.

Success in our vocation does not depend on our efforts or abilities, but as the document Vita Consecrata, at number 84 says that true prophecy comes from God and from friendship with Him, from listening to His Word in the different circumstances of history. On the other hand, it requires the search for God's will, ecclesial communion, spiritual discernment, and love for truth.

Be careful to avoid any decision or action that creates in you division between being and doing; be careful not to fall into either disembodied mysticism or secular efficiency.

Some questions to reflect:

- What has brought me here and supported my choice? What attracted me and what gave me the courage to continue?
- Is there something more that I feel I should do? What blocks me or puts obstacles in my way?
- What do I do to train my body to respond more faithfully and effectively to the inspirations of the Spirit?
- To what extent do calculations of personal satisfaction, career, fear of the future, influence my choices?

Sin and love

Today I want to talk about sin. You might say: what an unpleasant topic. I bring it up because discussing it can help us better understand the world we are sent to, and also because many of these worldly tendencies are also ours, which can help us better understand the truly important thing: the love of God.

Since childhood, we have been taught what sin is. The first sacrament we consciously received was Confession; we presented ourselves to the priest with a list of our wrongdoings, awaiting from him, with some fear, forgiveness and penance. We were also taught to distinguish between mortal sins and venial sins, those that offend God more or less and damage our souls more or less. This presentation of life and action has created in us a legalistic, functional, or efficiency-oriented mentality: I can do this, but not that; this is a duty, that only a suggestion. Perhaps it has made daily action simpler, but it has transformed it into something mechanical, cold, where the only sense of living is at the end, depending on whether I will be rewarded or punished, and this depends solely on the mathematical sum of faults and merits. God is relegated to heaven; He is a good judge, but nothing more. Seen in this way, our religion is not at all different from any other religion.

However, our nature rebels against this mentality because we are made for love, and only in it do we find true satisfaction and peace.

When we try to remove love from the world, other human impulses take over: security, comfort, power, pleasure, and we seek our joy in satisfying these impulses. There is a popular proverb that says: Everything that is attractive and nice, either harms health or is a sin. Gradually, a division is created within the person, so that on one side there is the self and its human fulfillment (career or satisfaction), which is managed mainly by the emotional part of our personality, while on the other side there is the "duty," what unfortunately we must do to avoid clashes with others or punishments. This is left to the intellect, even if it clashes internally with emotions. We can call this division the mentality of the so-called "secularized" world, that is, a world where there is no need of God.

Perhaps my presentation seems exaggerated and pessimistic to you; it is so on purpose, but there are many Christians who prefer to live this way, and also many consecrated people. Sometimes, inwardly, we do not feel the thrill, the beauty of life, but we console ourselves by deluding ourselves that we have everything under control, even God. Pope Francis, from the beginning of his pontificate, has spoken about this secularized and self-referential mentality, saying that it is so widespread even among religious people.

So, what is sin? Disobeying God's law? Disobeying all the rules and structures that we have created so that the world and society can function well?

We cannot understand sin in its truth and depth starting from human reasoning or even from calculations made on paper. To

understand it, we must refer to God's original plan, to the plan of His love for us. If we do not feel this love, we will not even feel the gravity of the evil we do.

A very common sentence we hear is that sin offends God. Attention: Sin offends us first and foremost. It would be like saying that I have a beautiful and powerful car but I refuse to go buy gasoline, or I fill the tank with some wrong fuel. Do I offend the gas station attendant or the factory that built the car? I am, first of all, ruining myself because I am ruining my car. Every time we sin, we harm ourselves because we deprive ourselves of the possibility of nourishing ourselves at the true source of life and we nourish ourselves with poisoned food. We also harm others and the whole world because sin always brings about a change in limited beings, increasing their limitations, while it can do nothing to those who have overcome the limitation of temporality, that is, those who are already in heaven.

Does God suffer because of our sins? Yes, but not because He is offended or hurt, but because He sees the harm we do to ourselves, the opportunities we miss. He suffers like a mother who sees her child hurting himself.

What are the temptations into which religious people most commonly fall? I call them temptations; I could have called them weaknesses. They are not necessarily sins, but they are certainly obstacles to our full adherence to God. I say this because, first of all, each case is different and it is never possible to make diagnoses and draw general solutions that are equal and valid for everyone; furthermore, a good part of the choices made

by a person in this regard are not dictated by a clear consciousness of wanting to do something wrong, but by a consciousness very limited by psychological pressure, environmental influence, past experiences, physical condition, and future prospects factors. So, full consciousness and deliberate consent, in the majority of cases, are absent. This means that every person, regardless of the seriousness of what he has done, should not be fought, but helped. We fight the wrong tendencies, not the person.

Returning to what was said above: if the only way to understand these weaknesses is through love, that is, seeing them as obstacles to truly living a life of love, the only truly effective tool in overcoming such limitations is love, which will take various forms: mercy, patience, humility, understanding, gentleness, and above all forgiveness. I can make a change in the heart of a brother or sister who has hurt me, only if I want his spiritual good, rather than seeing that he gets back all the bad he has done to me.

So, what are the most common weaknesses? Spiritual laziness, falsehood or hypocrisy, self-reference, ambition, authoritarianism, pessimism, low self-esteem, lack of trust in God's mercy. Each of these is present in us and also in those around us, to a greater or lesser extent, although usually one of them characterizes us more and on which we should focus our efforts. Each one must be fought by developing a particular value depending on whether we want to fight it in ourselves or we want to help someone else.

- Spiritual laziness, also called sloth, is being content with what one is, without any desire to do more or to grow. It hides distrust towards the world and towards the future. Normally, people affected by it are content to do their duty as required by the rule or by the superior. It is an attitude that makes every relationship difficult and removes all desire to love. The values to develop, that could help a lazy person to change, are the sense of responsibility and the desire for beauty.
- Falsehood and hypocrisy. These are the most difficult weaknesses to eradicate because the person is skilled in protecting himself and erecting barriers. It hides a deep fear of oneself and of what could happen. People who live with this attitude must gradually develop trust in others and the sense of how beautiful and liberating it is to live in truth. Those who live around them must use unconditional love towards them.
- Self-reference. This is a term that has been forged by Pope Francis since the beginning of his ministry. It is a concept that replaces "selfishness," a word that sounded too negative and judgmental. Those who live with this tendency place their own interest, safety, and satisfaction as the ultimate criterion for judgment and choice. Typically, it is characteristic of those who, as children, were not loved and felt deprived or abandoned; sometimes, even those who were overprotected and spoiled have this tendency. Self-reference prevents us from realizing that people around us

despise this attitude, and therefore, we do not win them over but distance them. The tendency, then, is either to blame them for what happens or to try to buy them. The cure for selfishness is to help the person develop a sense of belonging to the group, society, family, or, in our case, the Congregation. We do not belong to a family because we are smarter or more beautiful, but because we are the fruit of our parents' love, because we have a common purpose to achieve, and we will achieve it only together.

- Ambition and careerism. It is the tendency to judge our own value by the position we occupy. People who live with this tendency divide society into many groups or rather into many levels, and the criterion for distinguishing between these levels is purely external: wealth, power, social position. They think that happiness depends only on having climbed all the levels of society successfully, but they fail to realize that this is false and utopian. First of all: no matter how high we climb, there will always be someone higher than us, and because it is not true that those who have lower respect or love us just because we are more important; on the contrary, it is usually the opposite. These people must learn the value of gratuitousness and service, and those around them must establish genuine relationships that make it clear that the person is important to them, not the social position.
- Authoritarianism. It is the practical implementation of the previous tendencies. A person with this tendency, cannot establish stable relationships that are not based on his

prevailing. Normally, these are people who do not trust others, often live in fear, and are too focused on the success of what they do rather than on the people involved. It is good for them to have some healthy frustration that teaches humility and simplicity in relationships.

- Pessimism. It is a characteristic typical of those who are afraid and do not trust others. Their basic fear is that of suffering, combined with a certain sense of resignation. Pessimists need acceptance, tenderness, to be able to experience the strength of God's love that achieves good even from situations of defeat and suffering.
- Low self-esteem, also called abasement. It is an attitude often present among pessimists. Usually, these are people with strong feelings of guilt, not always justified. They are afraid of the judgment of others, so, to avoid that judgment, they do not take initiatives, lack creativity, and limit themselves to doing only what is expressly required of them. Perhaps, as children, they suffered because of the authoritarianism or ambition of others. Precisely because this attitude often goes hand in hand with that of pessimism, they need the same care: acceptance and tenderness. They need to experience that it is okay to make mistakes, because this happens to everyone.
- Lack of trust in the mercy of God. This attitude is also closely linked to the previous two. They see God as the "Righteous Judge" and themselves as "Sinners." They strongly feel that their mistakes have caused much harm and suffering to many, so they fear God's punishment. They have no memory

of moments of intimacy, affection, and protection from important people in their lives (parents, teachers, superiors).

These attitudes that I have listed are not sins, but they often condition our actions, take away our ability to love others, and give ourselves with confidence into the hands of God.

Some questions to reflect:

- Have I ever experienced the mercy of God within me?
- What are my weaknesses? Can I accept them? What actions do I take to overcome them?
- Can I prioritize my sister/brother and their well-being?
- Can I be merciful, patient, humble?
- Do I spend time listening to my sisters, encouraging them, making them feel welcomed?

Prayer

To follow the Master, one must know Him; to do His will, one must speak to Him, confront oneself with Him. Prayer and meditation are indispensable and irreplaceable tools to ensure that we persevere on the right path.

Since childhood, you have been taught to pray, and prayer still occupies a good portion of your day today. Today, we want to see how to better utilize this important tool for our religious life.

We are well aware of two types of prayer: that which is commanded by rules and that which is dictated by necessity. The precepts tell us to go to Mass, to confess and receive communion; tradition speaks of the Rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours, and novenas. How much do these prayers influence my daily life? We should ask ourselves some questions to verify what is happening within us. Why do we pray? Is it because, here on earth, someone or something commands us to do so? How much does our familiarity with the Master grow through these exercises?

Then there are moments of trial, of difficulty. We don't know where to turn, and we remember that God exists, that He is good, that He is powerful, and so we turn to Him. And then? Maybe we have obtained what we wanted and now return to our previous indifference, or we have not obtained it and then feel even worse.

I don't want to talk about this kind of prayer because it doesn't produce changes in our lives, it doesn't fill our souls with serenity and love.

We have said that we want to follow the Master, that for Him, we are willing to go into the desert, because we want to know Him, to listen to Him, to fall in love with Him, to understand and make His plan our own. This is prayer.

What better way is there to know a person than to listen to what they say? So, to learn how to pray, we must start with what He taught us about prayer, especially from the Our Father. Matthew, before reporting the words of this wonderful prayer, gives a strong introduction that we often forget, especially when reciting the Our Father from memory: "When you pray, do not be like the Pharisees, who think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. When you pray, say...". Jesus, at that moment, was not teaching an additional formula to recite, but was teaching an attitude to have when entering into relationship with God. Jesus teaches in response to a precise request from his disciples: "Master, teach us to pray." His disciples, as good Israelites, were accustomed to prayer; they knew the Psalms they recited in the synagogues. From childhood, they had learned the Psalms, the *"berakhot"*, the prayers of praise and blessing, and used them continuously throughout the day. A pious Jew would say up to 600 blessings from the crowing of the rooster until sunset. Most probably the disciples were expecting Jesus to provide them with a new formula that would distinguish them from others, or a formula that would guarantee that God would listen to them. The search for a formula comes from their weak thinking, not from the desire to enter into intimacy with God, but from a sense of distance, inadequacy, fatalism.

Jesus provides a short but profound "form," not a formula, to apply to long periods of prayer.

If you visit a catholic bookstore, you may find hundreds of book commenting the Our Father and all its parts; even Pope Francis gave one explanation some time ago, in his Wednesday catecheses. I will limit myself to highlighting some teachings.

The first rule of prayer: Prayer should not begin with our problems but with attention to God, looking Him in the eyes and calling Him Father; entering into direct relationship with God, in His presence as Father, daddy. With our prayer we should aim at the heart of God, and let ourselves be looked in the eyes by Him. Here's the great truth about our prayer: it must be a relationship from person to person. Too often this does not occur. We ask for many things, but if we do not ask for a person-to-person relationship, we do not enter into prayer. Then prayer is a relationship of affectionate confidence with God; it is moment of love and tenderness.

Here is then another extremely important rule for prayer: Your prayer should not start from your interests but from God's interests, as it happens in love relationships. Jesus is telling us again: you are at the presence of God who is your dad; open yourself to his love.

What can I do then?

"*May your name be sanctified*." May His Person be sanctified, may the Person of God be known in his holiness, a target we too should reach, an example we should follow.

Then Jesus tells you:

"*May your kingdom come*," You are asking him that the Kingdom of God come to earth, first of all in your heart. You must open your heart to Him and let Him enter.

Jesus then adds:

"*Your will be done*." When is it that the name of God is really sanctified and his kingdom really comes? When his will is done by all. How do I promote the Kingdom of God? By doing always his will."

You understand that so far, there has been no personal request, but rather an abandonment into His hands. But why does God behave like this? Does He want us to think only of Him? Is he against our requesting for graces? If not, why does He remain silent? Our prayers of request are good, but must be done at the right time, that is, after having developed an attitude of intimacy and dependence on the Father. In another passage Jesus invites us to ask insistently. It is an exercise of faith and also an exercise of humility; with a sincere prayer, faith and humility grow, and so does our sense of responsibility.

God's silence is precious, it is love; it gives us time to establish our responsibilities, it fosters collaboration, it helps to clarify what is our place and what is the one of God. Prayer is not a magic action on God; it is rather a formative action on myself, it converts me. So, Jesus emphasizes the teaching again, as if it were not enough, insisting again on the importance of asking. He presents a second parable. He says: "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?" A father does not have a hard heart; he listens to all the needs of his children. We must learn to recognize God's answers.

So, the most important prayer for those who want to seriously set out on the path behind Jesus is meditation. Meditation is not about speaking and much less asking; it is about listening, believing that God is there speaking in front of me. He speaks to me and has an

important message for me. Some Saints said that daily meditation, for religious people, is more important than Holy Mass. The sacramental aspect and the aspect of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist are not questioned, but meditation aims and has the ability to provoke personal conversion. Often after Holy Mass, we feel happy to have celebrated; meditation, on the other hand, must leave us with the uneasiness of something we have discovered and that must be translated into life. I do not want to diminish the value of liturgical prayer and even less of the Sacraments, but saints like Don Orione lived those forms of prayer in fullness, not because they strove to do so with Faith, but because they were aware of God's presence, eager to listen to Him, to enter into communion with Him, to receive His grace. They knew that immediately afterwards, they had much more strength to continue with fidelity and courage in their mission as "Instruments" in the hands of God.

Praying is filling ourselves with truth that must overflow. It is not us who tell God what to do, but He who tells us. It is He who speaks, and we listen. He remains who He is; we change. Prayer and meditation help us to discover the place Christ occupies in Creation. Everything is oriented towards Him, and has meaning in Him. Often someone deviates from the good road, loses his position, ruins himself, creates damage, suffering. We do not ask Christ to solve that particular problem, to heal that particular disease, to change the mind of that particular person; we reflect on the harmony that exists when one is connected to Him, we suffer with Him for what opposes His love, and then we ask Him to help us understand what we can do to help restore harmony, what changes we need to make in ourselves to be more effective instruments in that particular

historical situation. God cares for everything with His love, but this love is not something empirical that falls from the sky or magical that appears out of nowhere; it is a force that acts in the world through our hands, our words, our life, when our mind, our heart, and our strength are at His service.

So, prayer is linked to reality, to everyday life, not so much to change events, but to change our attitude towards them, our way of seeing them, which must become more and more "divine," seeing things with God's eyes. This is meditation. Don Orione taught us to see Christ in everyone and to work to bring everyone back to Christ. Instaurare Omnia in Christo must be the style and way of being of our prayer.

Our model to follow is Jesus Himself, in His constant union with the Father, in His nights spent in prayer, in His teaching on what to say when praying, but above all in the Garden of Gethsemane when after an inner struggle transformed into prayer, He comes to say: "Not my will, but yours be done."

Some questions to reflect upon:

1) Apart from moments of community prayer, how much time do I dedicate to personal prayer?

2) During personal prayer, what do I do? What type of prayer suits me best?

3) How much connection is there between my meditation and my daily life and apostolate?

4) When I listen to or read the Word of God, do I feel directly

challenged? Am I aware that God is speaking to me and asking me to do something?

The vows

We have understood that God needs our contribution to send His testimony of love and liberation into the world, but we have also understood what the weaknesses of the world are, including our own. Now we want to see what tools God gives us to be effective in our apostolate.

I'll start with a challenge from Pope Francis: "So we ask ourselves: by whom are we primarily moved: by the Holy Spirit or by the spirit of the world? It's a question we all must measure ourselves against, especially we, the consecrated people. While the Spirit leads to recognizing God in the smallness and fragility of a child, we sometimes risk thinking of our consecration in terms of results, achievements, success: we move in search of space, visibility, numbers: it's a temptation. The Spirit, however, does not ask for this. It desires that we cultivate daily fidelity, obedient to the small things entrusted to us." (Francis, February 2, 2022).

When we thinking of religious life in terms of comfort, security, and worse of career, we make a huge mistake; yet many fall into this error. Pope John Paul II in the famous document "Vita Consecrata," which remains the foundational document for every study and reflection on religious life, clearly states that in an increasingly secularized world, the testimony of religious, through their vows lived prophetically, counters the great temptations of the world called wealth, power, and pleasure, by exposing the falsehood hidden within them, and redirecting attention to the life of Christ

characterized by simplicity, service, trust in God. The world is modern and the forms in which it expresses itself are new, but the temptations are always the same three, with which Satan tried to detach Jesus from His salvific mission. If the challenges are essentially the same, the responses, that is, the vows, remain the same, but if the challenges present themselves in a new guise, increasingly attractive due to their modernity, media capability, and visibility, then the vows must also present themselves in a new, clearer, more provocative garment, stronger in testimony, more prophetic. Therefore, we must not relegate the vows to discipline (to follow rules), because in that there is no prophecy; much less if we read them in a moralistic way (to avoid dangers or sins). These are the two drifts through which we can betray the logic of the gospel: the norm and moralism. Let me explain.

We know very well that the vows have a dual value: canonical and spiritual. The first thing that young novices usually study is: what does this vow require of me? What should I pay attention to in order not to sin? This is the first step, but clearly, we cannot stop there. There is a whole part called: spirituality of the vow. This is where prophecy is at play. The question we must always ask ourselves is: How did Jesus live? His way of life, what changes did it provoke in the society of His time? What did Don Orione mean when he spoke of that particular vow? How did he live it? how did he relate to the life of the clergy and religious of the time? How did he relate to the life of the people? What novelty did he bring within the common legislation at that time? Pope Francis, in the speech he gave to the members of your general chapter 2017, said: "Show everyone the beauty of God's love that is manifested in the merciful face of Christ.

With this beauty, fill the hearts of those you meet." This is the key to interpreting the vows, not only the Fourth Vow, which being of Charity is directly characterized by Love, but also the other 3. Saint Paul is for us an example of constant union with God and availability to God's plan. He says: I have renounced everything to follow Christ; I have become all things to all people; be imitators of mine.

In the past, the profession of religious vows was conceived mainly in terms of personal sanctification achieved through detachment from the world and imitation of Christ, almost thinking that Christ had lived outside the world or in a "super-human" manner. Don Orione himself said: "The soul, docile, renounces the three powers that could detach it from God; and with the vow of obedience renounces the will, renounces the goods of the earth with the vow of poverty, and bodily goods with the vow of chastity. Man feels within himself a law that leads him to evil. Saint Paul said: "I feel in my body a tendency contrary to your law" (cf. Rom 7:23). By entering religious life, you shield yourselves from bad influences: everything helps to walk the path of salvation, to follow our Lord more closely. "Whoever wants to come after me must deny himself and follow me" (cf Mt 16:24). "What do the three nails that pierced the limbs of our Lord mean? They mean the three vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience; through these, the generous soul nails its freedom, its will, its satisfactions. How sweet is the company of our Lord on the cross, with our Lord from whom the light of love, of charity, of sacrifice emanates and spreads around!"

Somebody may think that once the profession is made, religious life consists only of observing the vows and everything else is a distinct matter. So often the vows become goals in themselves, rather than

remaining as means, and they became heavy duties to be fulfilled. Since no one can truly reach perfection, we often live them with feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

Of course, the aspect of personal sanctification and purification is still valid and important, but in Pope Francis' new ecclesiology, where every Christian is called to be a missionary committed to reach all those who are not touched by our structures, especially by the churches, catechesis, or oratories, those who are neglected and marginalized, the aspect of testimony and provocation becomes the new evangelizing weapon. What must clearly emerge in our way of living the vows is that Jesus comes to dwell among us, lives with us, and shows infinite passion for people, while strongly criticizing the mentality of the world. If Christ lived poor, chaste, and obedient, it is because that was the best way to love those people and make them understand His message of love. Let's take again the scene of the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the words of the old Simeon: "He is here for the ruin and resurrection of many, a sign of contradiction." This sign of contradiction regarding the mentality of the world is religious life. The prophecy of religious life is to show the contradiction of our way of being and doing, which is different from the mentality of the world. If we live and think like the world, we lose our prophecy. Being a sign of contradiction means, therefore, accepting to be a minority because going against the tide is difficult, it is tiring, but necessary, because it becomes a sign of contradiction with respect to the mentality of the world. We must not be discouraged by difficulties or fatigue. Woe if we are like the world! In conclusion, the vows are not things to be done, nor rules to be obeyed, but a way of being, a lifestyle. They have an apostolic value

in themselves that goes beyond the apostolate we do. We will see this more concretely when discussing individual vows.

The challenges still open to us today can be indicated as follows:

- Sociological challenge: What place, what impact does consecrated life have in a secularized society where the models are those of the pursuit of power, money, career, and sex?

- Anthropological challenge: What place does the transcendent religious vision of man occupy in a culture characterized by a biosocial anthropology (where the value is calculated by your social position or by how much you can produce), in which the transcendent dimension of the origin and purpose of human life is understated, negated, and questioned?

- Religious challenge: What significance does the dimension of religious obedience have in consecrated life in a culture that exalts individualism, self-realization, and unrestrained freedom?

- Cultural challenge: In the face of a culture of nonsense, transience, fluidity, is consecrated life a sign of hope and joy?

Questions for reflection:

- What does it mean for me to be "the spouse of Christ"? How does it affect my way of living?
- In what way do I feel different from my brothers or sisters? Is it only because I live in a community and I am not married?
- Does being a missionary inspire in me the desire to live more boldly, prophetically, generously?

Poverty

We are about to start the discussion on the vows.

We must bear in mind that the understanding of religious life has taken enormous steps since the time of Don Orione, especially after the Second Vatican Council. Now it is much clearer that religious life is in service to the Church and its pastoral action, and it is precisely in this area that the Church has made the greatest changes. The vows must conform to this new ecclesial vision given by Pope Francis and to the new challenges that he sends us.

It is worth noting what we have just said, namely that there is a way to live the vows literally by following exactly what is written in our constitutions, and there is, instead, a way to live them in a prophetic manner that goes far beyond the requirements of the vow itself, to be a clear and provocative message to those who watch and listen to us.

Coming to the vow of poverty, we must immediately clarify that it is perhaps the most visible vow of all, and therefore the most criticized and commented on by people. All in all, with today's open-mindedness, people are no longer scandalized if they hear that a religious has violated the vow of chastity; indeed, deep down, they laugh, but then they accept it. Regarding the vow of obedience, most people do not even notice that we have it because it mainly concerns internal dynamics within the community, where people do not enter. The vow of poverty, instead, concerns much how we present ourselves to people and how we present to them our possessions,

the house, the structures, the cars, spending priorities, etc. It is here that people see and comment, especially those who are used to making donations in church, perhaps very small, but they demand that their money be used properly. People also look at how we relate to the poor, serve them, welcome them, because they think that this should be our contribution.

Let's look at to Don Orione. Let's see immediately that he loved poverty very much and insisted that all of us love it, to the point of saying that we should be poorer than the Franciscans themselves, who, at that time, had the reputation of being the poorest congregation.

But why did Don Orione love poverty? First of all, because for him poverty was the way to show God that we trust in Divine Providence. It is as if we were saying to Him: "We cannot do it by ourselves, so if You want us to do things, You must give us the opportunity to do them by sending us benefactors." If we have our own money, God will demand that we use our money and everything ends there.

There is also a second aspect that is important for Don Orione, and that is, to act in charity, we must be free from all worldly ties. If we have too beautiful structures, we need to make them work, to maintain them; we incur huge expenses. The more we take care of the material things to which we are attached, the less freedom we will have to give our time and resources to the real poor. Not the poor in a generic way, but rather the specific person in front of me at this moment. Don Orione understood that being poor when facing a poor person, made him freer, rather than presenting himself to the same poor person but as the director of a large structure or as a

person very busy running here and there.

He also said that poverty is a sign of holiness and said that it is a guarantee of the congregation precisely for what we have said above about trust in Divine Providence.

Finally, for the last thing he said: if we are poor, we are obliged to work while the rich sit in their chairs. So, he always associated poverty with manual labor, with toiling, as he said, with being active as opposed to being relaxed.

Sometimes, he insisted that poverty is the best way to understand people's situations, on the one hand, not to judge them, on the other hand, not to fall into paternalism, but to truly understand their state of mind and share their situation with passion.

These are all very strong, very good ideas of Don Orione, from which we can start our personal reflection.

I would like to emphasize, then, first of all, the ability to make sacrifices. We have brothers and sisters who live with the vow of poverty but do not know how to make sacrifices. They do not seek luxurious things and do not want to waste money, but they do not accept that something is missing or that one day they have to give up a small thing. Sacrifice goes far beyond what is written in the rules and is not necessarily related to personal wealth or poverty, but it is a very important aspect that strengthens personality and gives testimony. There are many religious who can no longer work because they have too many things to do, and very often these are things related to their comfort, personal satisfaction, hobbies, times dedicated to personal readings, or other personal matters that do not directly concern the life of the community or the apostolate they

are carrying out.

Another aspect to emphasize is the ability to accept situations of discomfort. Today, provincials struggle to move a brother or sister from one community to another because in the community where they want to send them, something is missing or they have to get used to it, they do not know anyone, it is a new job, a less important position. Wealth ties us, it does not make us free.

These are all points that concern poverty and on which we must reflect.

When it comes to discussing prophecy, I think we need to go beyond everything we have said so far.

In this case, I am not talking about giving up luxurious things, but I am talking about the difference between working efficiently and effectively. Let me explain.

To be prophets means to deliver a strong, provocative, and often exaggerated message that should urge everyone to reflect, so that each one takes the position they consider right. What I mean is that, for example, we have the right to have a car, we have the right for the car to work well, we have the right for the car to be comfortable, especially if we need to take care of our health. This is a very controversial issue for which I have often found myself arguing with many religious. They responded with very serious reasoning that can be accepted, but I wanted to make them reflect "above the roof" of our human vision, as our former general superior Don Masiero always used to say. Very often, in the name of apostolate and of being efficient, we want to have everything necessary to do the work, to do it well, to do it quickly. Our charitable institutions are all

very efficient and maintaining them efficiently costs a lot. But very often, in the name of efficiency, we find ourselves unable to accept situations that are the ones that really need our help because they cannot fit into the now strict laws that government bureaucracy imposes on us. We no longer have time to listen to people because we have to run after the functioning of things. So, the impact with the poor who come to our door becomes nul, because, on one hand, they receive the medicines they need, the teaching they seek, they realize that things work well, are fast and well done, so they heal and are happy. But, on the other hand, they do not understand the difference between our clinic and a government hospital. They do not realize that we are religious, they do not understand what it means to be "Orionine".

If I dedicate time to listening, I don't have time to run after all the administrative aspects, I have to trust someone else with the risk of being less efficient and things not going as I would like. If we are less efficient, the poor receive less qualified help. But the central point is the message they receive. When I take time talking to them, they perceive that God listens to them, that God loves them, that the priests and sisters of Don Orione are there and share their situation, have compassion for them. From a worldly point of view, they receive less, from a spiritual point of view, they receive much more. Very often, in the end, it is precisely this spiritual situation that gives them the necessary strength to grow, to react to adversity, and therefore to achieve more even from a physical point of view.

We will talk about this when we mention apostolate, but I anticipate here that we must always aim for effectiveness, that is, the overall vision that the person has after having met us. What did they

receive, especially from a spiritual point of view?

From here stems the whole discussion about structures: should we maintain them or not? Can we hand over the administration to lay people and work in them as spiritual animators rather than administrators? Trusting laypeople in administration often means losing money, etc., a long discussion that precisely creates controversies.

One day I was talking to a missionary who had just bought a very nice pickup truck, luxurious, because it was very strong, 4-wheel drive, capable of carrying a lot of material. And I was telling him: You show up with this pickup truck in the poor village of the people and perhaps you even have the courage, during Mass, to ask for some money to repair the roof of the church? He replied: "But my pickup has to be strong because there is often mud on the road; it has to be strong because often I have to take people to the hospital; it has to be strong because when I go around, 50 children jump on the back and so I also provide this service; it has to be strong because I have a lot of material to distribute." All was true. But where is the evangelization of these people? Is it in the sermons we give at Mass? Do we help them see God's presence in their lives, understand that the message we preach during Mass concerns their lives? What message was conveyed? How does it impact people? They get used to seeing that we are good, they settle down saying that then the priest will take care of it. Perhaps they make an effort to help us because it is nice to be under us. With us, they have the opportunity to be rich, to take advantage of all the technologies we have. But the ability to take charge of their lives, to set something of their own, to feel the joy of realizing what they are doing, where does it come

from? We must teach them that God's Providence does not only lie in receiving, but they too must make an effort to help their neighbor and not simply wait for the priest to come. Love relationships, sharing among people do not simply come through technology, and very often, it does not come precisely because of technology.

How do we relate to the people we assist? Don Orione once wrote: "To marry poverty means to live as the poorest live".

It is clear that I need something basic, but one thing is the basics, one thing is to see that this basic continues over the years, one thing is to see how often we change cars, how new the cars are, what type of cars we buy, etc. But this means working harder, being more uncomfortable when we travel, and traveling on roads full of potholes for an hour to pass from one village to another costs a lot of effort, it's true! It costs more health, it's true! These are choices to be made, choices that cannot be imposed by superiors, by rules, they must be personal choices of the religious precisely because it is the religious who must give this testimony and, above all, it is the religious who must answer to God for what he is doing.

Today we must have the courage to make choices, especially in the face of the exaggeration of the use of things. Here also comes the whole discourse of ecology. Modern technology is exploiting the planet by using many more resources than the planet is capable of reproducing, using much more oxygen than our trees are capable of reproducing.

We are talking not only about pollution but also about the exploitation of resources, greenery, water. When we waste water because we use it to make our structures to look nice, who suffers,

it's not us but the poor where water is scarce and becoming less and less. This creates desertification, etc.

These are long, challenging discussions that we must think about, and poverty is very much involved in this. We can preach ecology, we can preach sharing with the poor, we can preach welcoming immigrants, only if we make it as our way of life, and it is conspicuous, that is, visible to the people we preach to.

Pope Francis reminded you: "The missionary is required to be a person free, living without anything of his own. I never tire of repeating that comfort, idleness, and worldliness are forces that prevent the missionary from "going out," from "departing," and setting out on the journey and, ultimately, from sharing the gift of the Gospel. The missionary cannot set out on the journey with a heart full of things (comfort), with an empty heart (idleness), or in search of things extranged to the glory of God (worldliness). The missionary is a person free from all these burdens and chains; a person who lives without anything of his own, only for the Lord and his gospel; a person who lives in a constant path of personal conversion and tirelessly works for pastoral conversion."

Some questions to reflect on:

1) How do I feel when I lack something? Uncomfortable, angry, do I feel the need to immediately go and search for it?

2) Is there something I am particularly attached to? Does this attachment create dependence? Does it prevent me from being open to others?

3) How do I see people who ask me for help?

4) Can I give up a bit of my comfort to go and help another?

Chastity

The vow of chastity is a very controversial vow, not because it is no longer needed or because priests and nuns can now afford to marry have particular relationship, but it is controversial for the way it must be analyzed. The vow of chastity can no longer be analyzed solely from the perspective of whether to marry or not, or how men and women relate to each other.

On this topic, the mentality between the times of Don Orione and our times has truly changed. If the concept of poverty has changed, that of chastity has changed ten times more, precisely because of how society today approaches all discussions concerning sexuality. For example, relationships, the way of relating to each other, are very different today compared to 50 years ago, and the word "love" itself is now understood only as satisfying one's own emotions.

When Don Orione spoke of Chastity, he spoke of a beautiful virtue, which for him corresponded to purity, integrity, therefore everything that had to do with oneself and with others, so as not to cause scandal.

Today we must go much further than this, without taking away any value from the past. The Pope tells us that our entire life must be missionary. To be missionaries means to have the courage to enter into relationships with people, especially the most needy, the most distant, the peripheries, etc., and Don Orione also said this. Today, the vow of chastity is lived mainly in the way we live our capacity to love everyone in a selfless way, especially these people. Loving does not mean avoiding, it means getting involved. Loving does not mean

being cold machines that perform actions, but it means considering and using our emotions. If I give space to emotions, an inner struggle erupts and I will have to learn to manage them properly.

The vow of chastity, if lived in the right way, nowadays is much more difficult and more challenging than it was 50 years ago. The erotic pressure of today's world, the way people talk, think, dress, act, are very distant from what we think about the vow of chastity. People look at whether we are married or not, whether we have a lover or not, whether we are homosexual or heterosexual, and in this they encapsulate our vow of chastity, while all this has very little or almost nothing to do with the vow of chastity.

A person who lives closed in his room will not have any wrong sexual relationships, but I ask you: does he perfectly live the vow of chastity? It's a provocative question.

God has called us to love, not to avoid danger. God has called us to enter into relationships with everyone. It is clear that the dangers of falling are many more, but it is precisely in loving more and loving everyone that we seek and find the solution to the problem of falls in chastity.

Don Orione was a product of his time. I don't know the letters and sermons that Don Orione gave to you sisters, you know them better than me, but you can tell me that there are strong phrases that today would make us smile a little.

We are called to live this vow prophetically. I start from an important aspect which is that of special friendships and how I manage relationships with others. I need people with whom I have a deeper friendship than with others, with whom I can confront, with whom I

can share my problems, my doubts. This, not only is healthy, but it is important, and I would say it is necessary, and the more we are involved in apostolate, the more we need it. But if I use relationships with others only to find personal satisfaction, even if they do not concern sexuality, if for example I use others as slaves to show my authority, I am not going against the vow of obedience or poverty, but against the vow of chastity, because I must love the other not exploit them. If I exploit the other to satisfy my thirst for authority, it's as if I exploit them to satisfy my thirst for sexuality.

Do you understand what I mean? Every day we meet many people. There are people who work with us and we treat them very coldly, we only make sure they do their job properly and that they are punctual; perhaps we forget that they have a family, problems, etc. Then we have the people we help, the school children, their parents, the sick in the clinic, etc. We make sure they understand that we are in charge; sometimes we encourage fear to make sure they do not take advantage of us. We have friends and relatives and we are very affectionate with them, too attached, abundant in phone calls and gifts. Finally, we have the members of our community and we are often cold, too worried, expecting to be accepted, but we spend little time listening to them and understanding them.

All these are exaggerated positions but they show how immature our relationships could be. This is where the vow of chastity plays its role. If before I said that poverty was necessary to enter into relationship, now I say that chastity is the way we enter into this relationship. Our relationships must be based on love, so I must always make sure that the person I am meeting leaves happy, because he has understood that God, the Church, the priests and the sisters, love him and know

how to listen, and know how to feel compassion for him, they are not afraid to approach, to listen, they do not feel superior, but they put themselves on the same level.

This is the prophetic testimony of chastity. We don't think about it and we never confess it, or at most we confess that sometimes we are rude to others, we treat the sister badly, etc. Here, instead, we are talking about the vow of chastity combined with the vow of charity that you have made. Your motto is Caritas Christi urget nos. What drives you in life is the love of Christ. For you, the vow of chastity, is the central vow.

In his writings and messages, Pope Francis often reports some words that have become famous precisely thanks to him. Among these, I underline self-referentiality, egocentrism and protagonism. For me, these three words represent the way Pope Francis sees sins against the vow of chastity. These three attitudes make it so that in everything we do, we put ourselves at the center.

Self-referentiality is talked about when a person makes all decisions to put himself at the center, because the person feels the need to appear, satisfy his feelings, moods and pride, so everything he does must bring personal gratification.

Selfishness, on the other hand, is closing oneself off to relationships with others for fear of having to spend oneself, to have to give oneself.

Protagonism, finally, is making sure to be seen as superior, in charge, capable, and better. All this concerns either external image, or personal comfort, or personal satisfaction and realization. When these three things are at the center there can be no love and

therefore what suffers is our vow of chastity.

So living the vow of chastity prophetically today means stepping out of ourselves and reaching out to others, paying attention to their true needs, making space for collaboration, making space for others to feel fulfilled; appreciating the people who work with us, making them feel important to us, showing them that they are capable, inspiring them and encouraging them to grow, improve, and fulfill themselves more and more, even from a professional point of view, encouraging those who make mistakes rather than correcting or punishing them; encouraging and picking up again and showing that our trust in them has not wavered even though they have made mistakes, but continues undiminished.

The gain we seek when we love is not for ourselves, but for the poor, it is their growth. The relationship with them will make the Congregation grow and if the Congregation grows, I will rejoice, while we often think in the opposite way, believing that if I am satisfied, I work well, so consequently the Congregation will be fine, and if the Congregation is fine, the poor will receive better help. Do you understand what the priority is, what the starting point is, and what the consequences of this way of thinking are? This is exactly the opposite of what the gospel and Pope Francis indicate. So, talking about chastity today is only understood if we talk about love, the ability to love.

Our vow of chastity teaches us true love which does not lie in impressing others to attract them to us. We don't seek to possess them, but to serve them in humility and detachment. They belong to God, not to us. The vow of chastity is lived only when we love in a

true way, that is, selflessly.

This is the main issue of our vow of chastity: do we seek a love based on self-interest, which satisfies our desires and instincts, or a pure love like that of Jesus?

Every time we seek human approval, in reality we go against the vow of chastity.

Chastity is poverty at a higher level (obedience is another type of poverty).

The mystical aspect of this vow is to see God in all people.

The prophetic aspect is to love them all, not to possess any of them and finally to bring them to Jesus. Jesus loved them all freely, because looking at them he saw the Father's desire to save them and saw their desire for true love. He did not hold them back, but let them go their own way, he only gave them an indication of how to find God. 1 John 4: 19-21. "We love because he first loved us. If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also."

What are the challenges for religious today?

Understanding that the vow of chastity is for us a value that makes us like Christ, it is a great and precious gift, "For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29), and we must take care of it: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (2

Corinthians 4:7)

We must work on the ability to build inner freedom: "So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'" (John 8:32). Often there is the temptation to compromise with sin (just a little, just for a while, just once), or to live at a double level (this is my private life, when I am with others I behave well), controlling fantasies or wrong desires that create dissatisfaction.

Having the courage to love: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:46-48).

The final aspect concerns relationships within our communities. True love begins with the family. It is useless to go out and preach love when we are not able to practice it first at home. Love within the community often requires patience, trust, forgiveness, but we will be more stable in external relationships if we have a strong bond at home and how weak we would be in the opposite situation.

Some questions for reflection

- Am I content with my vocation, with myself, with my work?

- Am I satisfied with how I relate to the people around me?

- Is there a particular friendship in my life that I feel a bit embarrassed about or that I wouldn't want other people to know

about?

- Who are the people I am truly attached to and why am I attached to them?

- How do I treat my workers or the people I encounter in my work?

- Who are the people I can truly say I love? How do I express my love for them?

- Am I a busy person or do I have a lot of free time? How do I use that time?

- Is there something in my past life that I feel guilty about, find it difficult to talk about or think about?

- Do I only love those who love me, accept only those who are grateful or those who can afford my services, or am I really following the teachings of the Gospel?

Obedience

The vow of obedience has also changed over the years, but perhaps it is one that is noticed less. In the time of Don Orione, obedience was mainly centered towards the local superior and it involved implementing what he decided. He saw obedience as a way to discipline oneself, avoid temptations, and ensure the full efficiency of the works. Today everything is different, and it involves the very approach we have in our daily actions, both within the community and in apostolate.

We must bear in mind that obedience, as a vow, only makes sense if framed within the overall context of total self-giving to God to live in union with Him, and it is carried out as a practical application of the obedience that each of us owes to the Father's plan. The way to realize this plan is to do it with the same style as God, that is, with Love. For this reason, we cannot speak correctly about obedience if we do not start from Love. If we do things that go against the love of the people around us or the people we serve, this obedience no longer makes sense. What does this mean? What is God's plan? What determines its effectiveness?

Jesus came to draw all people to Himself and in this way save them. While in the desert, the devil showed Him a shortcut to His mission: "Worship me and all the kingdoms of the earth will be yours." If Jesus had accepted to be a king, He could have exerted greater influence on people and established a true earthly kingdom of justice and peace. Instead, Jesus rejected the devil's offer and chose the path of service and sacrifice: "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will*

draw all people to myself." He is the Messiah, but a Messiah different from what people were looking for. He is not the leader who fights invaders, but the one who loves enemies.

Every day we choose human power, success rather than service and humility. Do we truly understand Jesus? Do we really know Him? The devil tempts us into small things. He is not so foolish as to suggest that we choose evil, but he suggests that we choose reasonable, obvious things, the only ones that will easily succeed; here is the earthly messiah.

Humility is one of the most effective tools for living obedience well, and for living it spiritually. It allows us to establish meaningful relationships, to see that we are just a small tile in a large mosaic, so it gives us the ability to focus on the entire mosaic and not just on our role within it. The people we collaborate with are equally important tiles and each will do well in their task, especially if the relationship between us aligns. So, if we don't support each other or fit together properly, we leave gaps.

Therefore, obedience becomes important in apostolate management.

A discussion on obedience cannot avoid dealing with the topic of authority, which is service, and not a demonstration of power. Therefore, it has a purpose that is anything but demonstrating personal capabilities. Authority is the ability to dialogue towards a common discernment of God's will to which we all must fully obey.

To understand authority well, we must keep in mind a few points:

- Authority is at the service of the kingdom of God and subject to it.

- Authority is at the service of the good of the Congregation and the community and subject to it.

- Despite the work of the Holy Spirit in us, no one can claim to possess the truth, so humility is of great help.

As a consequence of these points, we can say that:

- Authority is true when exercised in love.
- Authority must combine the dual aspect of dialogue and decision-making; of humility and courage.
- Both obedience and authority, if lived in truth, do not bring glory but sacrifice, because they are based on the example of Christ.
- Both the decision-maker and the one who obeys, will have to face doubts, sometimes even deep doubts of faith or conscience. Jesus faced the same in the garden of Gethsemane.
- Authority and obedience will only work if there is mutual trust within the community.

There are two human aspects to consider that have become increasingly common in religious life over the years:

- Autonomy, meaning the right I have to manage my own affairs and to have everything I need.

- Independence of action, meaning that if I have a task to achieve, I make the decisions, carry out the projects as I like, and at most, report or discuss it with the community.

Independence and freedom of choice are deeply rooted in our minds, even in the poorest person, and giving them up costs much

more than relinquishing material things or even a family.

When I was in India, I often spoke to some sisters and said to them: think of a girl from a poor family. She faces the prospect of living in a hut in a slum with a drunken husband because her parents cannot afford to pay a dowry to a decent man. She is certainly willing to enter a convent and become a nun. For her, this is a promotion, not a sacrifice. But will she be willing to give up her pride, her ideas, and her independence?

Unfortunately, it often happens that in our works, due to the shortage of personnel, there is only one active religious. We have houses, for example in Argentina, where there are three active religious: one manages the parish, one manages the school, and one manages the Cottolengo. At the end of the day, the three are tired, they certainly don't feel like discussing how things are going, so the parish priest knows nothing about the school and the Cottolengo, the director of the Cottolengo knows nothing about the school and the parish, at most he goes to say mass there on Sundays, and so does the school director. In this case, what does obedience consist of? This is a big problem.

It is easy to hear: "I have to make the decisions because others don't know anything"; this is a mistake. Sometimes there are important decisions to be made, such as: which employees do we want to hire, what relationship do I have with the school or Cottolengo management committee, which people do I accept or not accept within the structure, the children who come to enroll in school, or the sick people I accept. When the person in charge of decisions is alone, the risk of making mistakes, favoritism, and even committing

abuses increases a lot. In any case, even if the person does not fail, if he is alone, he exposes himself to criticism without anyone to defend him. When I talk about abuses, I am not only referring to sexual ones, but abuses of power, professional abuses, etc. When a person is alone, he feels more tired, he easily becomes nervous, and therefore relationships suffer, and as I said, the vow of chastity suffers. To make our structure work well, we will have choices to make that truly push towards efficiency, and therefore, as we explained yesterday, the vow of poverty is affected.

The vow of obedience is the least known and the least considered. But according to Saint Benedict, it is the most important of all, and the one that guarantees the continuity of the congregation.

We have said that the vows must be lived not blindly following only the letter, but in an apostolic and prophetic manner. What does it mean to live obedience in a prophetic way today? To give a testimony that forces those who see us to reflect.

There are three values whose testimony the world needs:

1. Collaboration; it is necessary to show that we know how to work as a family, as a congregation, as a team, with mutual respect, and also sharing.
2. The understanding of authority as truly based on service and not as personal or professional achievement.
3. Capacity of listening to the suggestions of others and value them, before making decisions, because we say and believe that we are seeking the will of God and we owe Him true obedience. This is the process that today is called synodality.

One last problem to solve concerns the relationship between

obedience and freedom.

Attention, because here there is a danger of manipulating consciences.

Evangelical obedience is like that of Jesus: "*I give my life of my own accord; no one takes it from me*." Jesus goes to the cross not to blindly "obey" a command of the Father, but because He accepts and gives His life spontaneously. Jesus goes to the cross as a Son, as a free man.

I must take responsibility for what is asked of me. Living obedience is not just executing orders. I choose what I may not have chosen. I decide to obey and do what is asked of me with full inner adherence and freedom, and this implies a new relationship with ourselves. We are not called to show the world sacrifice, nor even a passive execution of commands, but joy, freedom.

Some questions for reflection:

- How active am I in the community? How engaged in my life?

- Do I consider the community as my family and the house as my home or do I feel like I'm in a hotel?

- What are the things I want to achieve in life?

- How do I consider God's work in my life, in my society, etc.?

- Is there anything else I could do for the improvement of my community and the Congregation?

- How do I usually relate to rules and regulations?

- How do I consider our Constitutions: lenient, strict, feasible,

idealistic?

- How willing am I to sacrifice to remain faithful?

Charism and fourth vow

Before going directly to the topic of the fourth vow let me start with a question: What is a charism? Of course, you know it well since not only your novice mistress has taught you about it, but also heard of it in many occasions. Let me just recall a short definition that helps to introduce the topic. Using simple words, I would say that **a charism is a gift the Holy Spirit gives to the Church for its enrichment and help to address particular needs**. This gift is given, normally, through a person, a founder, in our case Don Orione who, through his holiness must translate this gift into something visible, understandable, and especially transmissible, so that it may continue even after his death.

Saying that, we understand first of all the connection with the Universal Church. It is not a gift to a person, but to the Church so it is not something that we should hold on tightly and jealously, but something that has to be developed at the service of the Church. The second point is that if it has been entrusted to Don Orione, then we have to look at him as an example to be followed and a key to interpret it. The third point is that if it is for the good of the Church, then it finds its fulfillment not by benefitting the carriers (us) but the people of God. Here comes a first difficulty: the people we meet today in our apostolate are different from those Don Orione met in his days, so we must look at Don Orione not to imitate his deeds, but to incarnate his spirit and ideals in today's society. This process is known as “Inculturation of the Charism”.

So, what is our charism? How does it distinguish us from other charismatic families? Nowadays, whenever we speak of charism, we

prefer to speak about charismatic family, rather than congregations, because the charism is one, the same for both our congregations, and for all the 5 branches of the family.

Please allow me to read a number of the constitutions of the FDP that describe our charism well: the n. 5.

> *"The special aim of our Congregation is to spread the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, the Church and the Pope, especially among ordinary people. It strives to attract and unite with a most tender and close bond of the whole mind and heart, all the children of the people and the working classes to the Apostolic See, where, in the words of Chrisologus, blessed Peter lives, presides and gives the truth to whoever asks for it.*
>
> *It does this by means of an apostolate of charity among the humble and poor through such institutions and works of spiritual and corporal mercy as are most suited to the Christian education and formation of needy young people and people in general. Its aim is to cooperate with humility, at the feet of the Apostolic See and of the Bishops, to renew and unite in Jesus Christ our Lord, mankind and society, by bringing the hearts of abandoned children, the poor and the working classes to the Church and to the Pope "ad omnia in Christo instauranda, ut fiat unum ovile et unus pastor" (in order to restore all things in Christ, so that there may be one flock and one shepherd).*

So the main aim is to attract everybody to Christ and the Pope, and the way to do it is through charity to the most needy.

The fourth vows

Now the question comes: if we have one charism, why do we have different fourth vows? Shouldn't we have the same vow and also the same style of life? In fact, as a family, we have the same style of life though this must be incarnated in the situation in which we live, as religious consecrated, lay consecrated in the secular institutes, or lay committed in the lay Movement. But the purpose of the fourth vow is not that of indicating how we should live, but of underlying a particular aspect of the charism that we want to focus on in a particular way.

In the origin of Religious Life, in the first centuries of Christianity, the religious used to have only one vow, that of obedience. With that it was clear that all the rules and regulations regarding chastity and poverty would be put into practice. But to better underline the fact that the religious are supposed to imitate the life of Christ, little by little the congregations transformed into vows also the other two characteristic features of Christ's life, chastity and poverty. Here are the three vows that differentiated the religious from other people. All the congregation had the three vows, to be practiced according to different sets of rules that would differentiate them. Some felt it necessary to introduce a fourth vow that would better specify the characteristic of their congregation, hence the fourth vows. Some congregations also introduced a fifth and a sixth vow. In one thousand years of religious life, about 140 special Vows come out beside the three common ones. Usually, they are gathered in three main groups:

- Vows that have a **specific social activity** as their aim (e.g. the redemption of Christians for the Mercedarians; the service of poor sick people for the Camillians).
- Vows that bind to a **particular form of life** (e.g. the cloister for the Poor Clares).
- Vows of special **obedience to the Pope** (e.g. Jesuits, Rosminians, Orionines).

In this division, we could say that your vow belongs to the first group, while ours belongs to the third.

I prefer, instead, a specification Fr. Flavio used to do: a vow is usually made to emphasize either the aim of the charism (fidelity to the Pope and the Church), or the instrument indicated by the founder to attain such aim (the charity). So, in this case, while both congregations share the same charism and also the same purpose and way of fulfilling it, we stress more on the aim, you on the instrument. This has a historical reason. By the time Don Orione started your congregation, in 1915, the number of priests in our congregation had already increased and they were fully involved in the dynamics of the diocese with responsibility of preaching and teaching. Don Orione kept on insisting that we too should work through charity and should be involved with the poorest people, but he understood also the need to witness the spiritual and theological side of it. By creating your congregation, he founded a group more dedicated to direct work with the poor, the orphans, and people with disabilities. That is why for you he preferred to emphasize the aspect of charity. The two mottos chosen: Instaurare omnia in Christo, & Charitas Christi urget nos, underline well this difference.

Purpose of the fourth vow

- The fourth vow gives a new meaning to our desire for holiness and a program on how to achieve it.
- It gives a new way of living the other three vows. You are called to live poverty chastity and obedience not just like the sisters of any other congregation, but with a special attitude: through charity, as described by your constitutions in the chapter dedicated to it.
- It also indicates an intrinsic relationship between the spirit that gives life to your congregation, and the desire to be bound to it in a special way.
- It comes from the commandment of the Lord: "Love one another as I have loved you", so it shows in which way we want to follow it.
- It is necessary to be prophets in everyday life.
- Through it, we renounce ourselves, our time, our life to dedicate them to the poor; doing so we profess that we totally belong to God and the Church. That is, in virtue of our consecration, we do not have and cannot have any other aim than the service of God, nor any other interest if not the Lord's. We belong to the Lord.

Biblical aspects of our fourth vows.

The two mottos of our congregations come from the letters of St. Paul. But these two sentences are not the only ones that make Don Orione stand beside the great apostle. There are also other passages from St. Paul's letters that describe well Don Orione.

"*It isn't any more I who lives, but Christ who lives in me*".

"*I fulfill in my life whatever still lacks in me of the suffering of Christ*". Towards the end of his life, he wrote: *"I gave up everything for the sake of following Christ. I made myself all to all. Be imitators of mine"* Don Orione wrote also a wonderful comment to the hymn of charity of 1 Cor 13.

He was a great estimator of St. Paul and all the above sentences find in him a marvelous application. Like St. Paul, he felt the deep desire to make everyone experience the love of God and so to be saved. From St. Paul, he took the doctrine of the Church as the mystical body of Christ, on which the whole of our spirituality is based.

Now I want to try a different approach to the vow of charity.

If we put together all the above sentences from St. Paul with chapter 25 of Mathew (The Last Judgment) and the definition of God as Love of 1 Jn 4, we can discover the strange dynamics of God's love.

We could compare our charity to someone who shoots. Looking at him, we must take into consideration the shooter, the weapon, and the target. We are the shooters, charity is the weapon, and the poor are the target. But if we act in persona Christi then a very strange dynamic takes place because it is Christ who shoots in us, the instrument or weapon is charity but we know that God is love, and the target is the poor but we know that what you have done to the needy you did it to me. So, Christ is also the target. God is present in all three aspects. The thing becomes even more complicated if we look at the movement of return because, if there is Christ in the poor, then the weapon, that is, charity, also fires back because by doing good to Christ, we do good to ourselves, that is, we give to ourselves a further possibility of meeting him and allowing him to benefit us, and in doing so he increases in us our conformity to his image.

If we keep in mind the presence of Christ in the poor, a whole way of approaching Him, of treating him, of serving him derives from it, which goes far beyond service done well, human respect, but it requires a capacity for relationship based on sincere affection and veneration. (*See in the Appendix the text: Feeling and seeing Christ in men*). Hence some of our founder's expressions like "The poor are our masters".

From this comes the whole discussion of an apostolate that must not be a simple act of welfare but a true human promotion and liberation of the person from all those structures, especially the cultural ones, which still make people slaves to their physical or intellectual shortcomings.

How to live the fourth vow.

If we want this conformation to Christ to function, we need a great virtue: humility. While acting out of charity, we could come to believe and make people believe that we are good, that we are saints, that we are better than them, that people need us, and that without us, things would go badly; in short, we are the ones who save people.

The more these thoughts enter our minds and fill our hearts, the less space remains for God. This is what Pope Francis denounces as self-centrism (auto-referenciality). When we put ourselves, our pride, and our interests at the center, God, little by little, disappears from the scene, and the human side takes place.

There is no doubt that our charitable works, the Cottolengos, the kindergartens, the missions, are well conducted, and there is no doubt that anyone who enters them comes out benefited, cared for,

educated, and helped. The problem is that our institutions are becoming more and more humanely managed, and transmit an increasingly social but less and less divine message. Pope Francis says that many institutes are becoming NGOs. Don Orione, who had understood the matter since then, insisted a lot on the fact of remaining small, poor and humble in the hands of God and introduced the theology of the rag of which you are more experts than me.

Even the question of giving preference to the smallest, poorest, most abandoned ones comes from this perspective. If I want my work to be efficient, functional, with no economic problems, with a certain name and prestige, and give me certain security and even comfort, then I must reject problematic people, refuse admittance to those who give less security, are least manageable, or perform poorly at school, because they consume more resources than they produce, give more problems than fame, require more of my time and therefore I have less time left for my personal affairs. These are the human reasonings that all charitable structures, including governmental ones, make, but you understand that they are anti-evangelical.

It is never easy to run a charity institution like our Cottolengoes, because it is demanding from the point of view of administration, social regulations and standards, finances, etcetera. So, it is easy to fall into the temptation of setting efficiency as the priority. We must run our institutions properly, but never at the expense of the poor and most needy, whom we should always set, instead, as a priority, since they are the real reason for us having the institution itself. If we simply follow efficiency, then we become like any other secular hospital, hostel, or school.

So how should we act when we are pressed from one side by the requests of a poor person and at the other side by the needs of administration? There is no simple or automatic answer, and any case must be dealt with, properly and directly. Through experience, you will learn what to do, but, anyway, in each of those moments, you need to do a proper discernment, which is primarily a spiritual process. What we want to discover and follow, is the will of God regarding that particular situation.

What we must do from now on is to improve our spirituality and our trust in God because he is the one who takes care of each person beyond our capacities. We must learn how to recognize his voice talking to us in the different events.

Apostolate (we work in God's name)

Now we want to get practical about life, to see how to apply all the beautiful theories we have learned in recent days.

When we talk about our works, we use the word apostolate. Much of our days and our lives are dedicated to apostolate. Jesus himself spent much time with the poor. All the founders emphasized well that we are destined for the poor and that our congregation is considered among those of active life, not contemplative. Is this perhaps in contradiction with the need to be mystics? No one denies the importance of apostolate, but the challenge is to consider it in its integral dimension. Every apostolate always has two dimensions: helping the needy and witnessing the Kingdom of God. So, the real question is to discover what is the place of our apostolate in God's plan.

Apostolate is a necessary part of religious life, even for contemplative congregations. Pope Francis insists a lot on the fact that our faith and testimony become real when we go to the furthest, to the neediest and most abandoned.

When we look at our charitable works (especially in places like Europe where they seem to have become redundant because governments are doing the same work and with better equipment), we must keep two things in mind: the objective of our apostolate and the message we present.

a) The objective means: whom do we want to speak to through our works? Our charitable works always act on three levels: at the first level, we have the needy (people with disabilities, the elderly, the poor, students, etc.). At the second level, there are all the people

involved in our work, which means our staff, the relatives of our beneficiaries, and the volunteers who, in various ways, come to help us. Our apostolate also addresses them. At the third level, no less important, there is the entire society, all those who do not know us, who will never enter our structures. Seeing from the outside the work we do, they must be provoked to reflect on the value of life, the spirit of service, the need to take care of the weak, the goodness of the Church, etc. So, the objective of our works is not only the sick or the needy we serve directly.

b) The message. Regarding the message we want to send to these three categories, this too is varied.

- The first message that should always be present and clear is about God's love that takes care of everyone. That's why we love them: because God loves them, they are precious to Him, and they must feel this through our work.

- The second message is that the Church also loves them and we participate in the Church's concern through our work. We don't just talk about our congregation, we always speak in the name of the whole local and global Church and work in communion with it.

Apostolate means work done by Apostles, that is, by people who are sent by someone. It is a work that we do on behalf of someone else. Here is already an important first reflection: the works are not ours, they belong to someone else. We are only workers and as workers we must follow the directives, the norms, the style, the orientations that are given to us by the master of the work.

We are sent: then, let's look at who sends us to understand how we should work.

First of all, we are sent by God. The Congregation is in the hands of God, it is the work of God; Charism comes from the Holy Spirit. We say: "It is clear that we do it on behalf of God; we are Christians, we are consecrated, so we work for God, not for any other". In saying this, however, we should have the courage to verify if what we say or think really corresponds to the truth, and this is a continuous process. It is not just a matter of saying: I work for God, but I do what I want. I will often have to get in touch with God to compare if what I am doing is right, if it is according to His style and His will; therefore, there cannot be apostolate that is not based on prayer.

Someone might say: many of the works we do are not related to a spiritual discourse, for example, if I am a nurse and work in a hospital, I meet patients whom I have to treat for diseases, wounds; often they belong to different religions or are even non-religious; I have to treat them anyway. When I say that we must be in touch with God and therefore pray, I do not mean that we must necessarily preach, but I mean that apostolate must be prepared with prayer, must be reviewed and thanked, in the end, with prayer. We religious are used to having morning prayers, mass, and meditation. These moments are placed there, not because there was no other available time, or because the morning is the most convenient time so we can get it over with, quickly, but because the morning is the most important time of the day, it is the time when I prepare all the activity of the day in the presence of the Lord. While I pray, I must think about what I will do, who I will meet, what I will witness to those people, and how I will witness to them as a Christian and as a religious, even if they are not Christians. Similarly, we have become accustomed to doing the examination of conscience at night. This is

the time to review how our day and our apostolate went. Clearly it cannot last 30 seconds.

So, my way of acting will be based on the commandments of the Lord, that is, on the commandment of Love, and I will show Love even without opening my mouth. My way of acting will be set on Love, my choices will have Love as the final and only criterion.

To make Jesus' style ours and learn to live as He lived, we must learn to read the Word of God. The readings I do during mass make me understand Jesus' style, how He approached the sick, the poor, the sinners, and how He treated them. During my apostolate I will meet people who need me, but I will also meet people who maybe want to take advantage of me; I will meet people who hinder me because they don't like my way of doing apostolate: how will I treat them? How will I respond to these provocations?

Don Orione says that we also do apostolate in the name of the Church, for the Church. The words that Don Orione wrote when he drafted the first constitutions of our Congregation are clear: The main purpose of the Little Work is to attract the poor and the small into the arms of the Church and of Peter. The Church is the incarnation of the presence of Christ today in the world, so the authentic way to interpret the Scriptures is through the Magisterium of the Church. What are the guidelines that the Church gives us regarding apostolate? What does the Pope tell us about the work to be done and how to do it? What does the Pope ask of religious today? How should religious present themselves to the world and where should they go to do their work? Now you understand better what it means to say that we work in the name of the Church.

Then we do apostolate in the name of the Congregation. There is a sense of belonging; we are a family and we want to show that it is the family that acts. By saying this, there is very little room left for protagonism. The protagonist makes a show of himself that prevents people from seeing the Congregation, the Church, and even God.

Let's return to Jesus to see how He carried out His apostolate.

At the beginning, He presents Himself in Nazareth and clearly states what His mission is. People do not understand and do not accept His presentation; they would like a different person who would make them proud and bring glory to their village. Jesus, instead, presents Himself as the one who must work for the poor and the sick. They drive Him away from their city. He continues to go around preaching; other villages seem to welcome what He says willingly, and He becomes famous. Late in the evening, He withdraws to pray. When the apostles find Him in the morning, they tell Him: everyone is looking for you; He replies: Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I have come.

Just in this brief presentation, we see many aspects of interest.

1) The truth of the message lies in coherence. He does not seek success but fidelity.

2) He does not cling to anyone, especially not seeking either success or glory.

3) He is willing to leave everything to continue His work; He does not remain stuck in one place or on one aspect that may give Him more satisfaction.

4) He seeks out especially the last ones.

5) Often apostolate is not planned, at least that of Charity, but is a response to a need; in fact, Jesus does not go in search of the sick or the possessed; He meets them and feels called to respond to what He has before Him. Nowadays, everything must be planned to be efficient in our work, but how do we approach unexpected situations that do not fit into our plans? Don Terzi, speaking about our spirituality, used to say that it is that of the emergency room, not institutionalized care. In short: it is true that we have large institutions and we must manage them, but our peculiarity should not be to focus on a particular work. We are not a congregation of little cottolengos, nor a congregation of schools, nor a congregation of missions, nor a congregation for young people. We embrace all these things because the criteria of our choice are not based on the type of work to be done, but the emergency that presents itself to us and that Providence sends us. We distinguish ourselves not for what we do, but for how and why we do it.

We must learn above all what charity is and how to live it. Only then can we apply it, and the Lord will send us a thousand opportunities to do this charity. I am not saying that we must close the works we have, because our works, if managed properly, will always offer us the best opportunity and the urgency to work. We must be experts in doing charity, that is, acting with love, being led by love, and ensuring that our choices are based on love rather than on the efficiency of our institutions.

Every work we do, whether institutional or improvised, always has repercussions at various levels, or rather, acts on various levels. Let's see what the various dimensions of apostolate are.

1- Theological Dimension: God sent His Son to reconcile the world with Himself. He wants all of us to participate in His life. Therefore, every apostolate aims at the "total" salvation of the person and society. Now, the material well-being of the person (intellectual, medical, social, etc.) is the external aspect, the only visible one. It is a very important aspect, otherwise our apostolate loses credibility, but it is not the only aspect nor the most important one. "S*eek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*" (Matthew 6:33).

2- Spiritual Dimension: Christ came to redeem us. He is the only and universal Redeemer, so every apostolate must be centered on Him. "*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*" (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). We cannot do apostolate that does not have Christ in it. We cannot plan apostolate solely basing on our abilities, structures, etc. We cannot have apostolate that does not go through our daily Eucharist, our daily meditation, etc. We cannot have apostolate that is perfectly and strictly linked to structure, rules, etc. because often the Spirit breaks our standards. Any structure, by its nature, makes a selection and tends to eliminate those who do not fit into it, but most of the time it is they who really need it.

3- Social Dimension: God wants to save everyone, so the goal of our apostolate is "everyone", especially the neediest, including sinners, those who reject God, those who reject our mission. "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that

is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing." (Luke 15:4-5). This does not mean that we must convert them or force them to become Christians. It means, instead, that the "good news" of Salvation must reach them. Most of the time, this will happen through our attitude rather than through words. Our apostolate for them will be our acceptance, understanding, and forgiveness.

4- Methodological Dimension: apostolate is a work of Christ, so it must have the style of Christ (Philippians 2:5-8). We talked about it above: we need a daily confrontation with the Gospel, and that is why I said that our apostolate must go through our meditation. We should also ask ourselves: am I sure that what I am doing is God's will, that I am doing it as He wants?

5- Ecclesial Dimension: Jesus did not do everything alone, but He chose people around him, he trained them to be a group and entrusted them with the mission of continuing His apostolate. Consequently, apostolate cannot appear as the work of one person (even when there is only one person working on it), but must be a work of a community and of the Church. We always work in the name of the Church, within the Church's plan, and in communion with other organizations and congregations working in the Church. This is called Synodality. Think for a moment about the often-existing competition between different institutions, schools, the gossip we spread among people about other congregations or even about bishops or the Church. Even if what we say is true, such gossip creates division, and division is always the work of the devil.

6- Emotional Dimension: this dimension is more important than

expected because apostolate is fundamentally a relationship, and in every relationship, emotions are important. When we deny emotions, we fall into formalism, into the cold administration of affairs; on the other hand, when we overvalue emotions, we lose sight of priorities and the true purpose of apostolate. This usually ends in disaster. Emotions must be considered by both parties: the person we are helping must be redeemed in the totality of their humanity, so we should always be aware of not hurting them, humiliating them, exploiting them; they should feel understood, accepted, loved, even when we cannot help them materially. If our task is to distribute God's love, how can we do it roughly, without love? Our emotions are also important. It is normal and beautiful to feel satisfaction for what we do, but the search for satisfaction should not prevent us from doing jobs that are not rewarding, dangerous, difficult, which have a high risk of failure, which are less prestigious, which offer less visibility or appreciation. We must feel empathy and compassion for people, but at the same time, we should avoid attachments that usually lead us to make preferences, create divisions, jealousies, etc. If we do apostolate for ourselves, for our satisfaction, and only care about pleasing people to attract them to us instead of bringing them to Christ, then we are like the wicked laborers of the vineyard in the parable: God will eventually take the vineyard away from us and give it to someone else. (Matthew 21:33-45) Instead, we must let them go even if we risk losing them. Perhaps we can read in this way the crisis of current vocations in religious life and the increase of lay movements.

In apostolate, there is always the temptation to seek success, fulfillment, and sometimes apostolate becomes a way to escape

from community life that does not satisfy us, is boring, or demanding.

Returning to the point seen above about having the style of Christ, we must be careful of the temptation of efficiency, which is to attribute value to our work based on the results we obtain. Jesus' miracles did not convert anyone. Many people followed Him but then left. The two greatest miracles of Jesus were followed by the greatest apostolic failures: after the multiplication of the loaves, the people went away forever (John 6). Many, although they saw the miracles, were not willing to listen to the words of Jesus and especially were not willing to accept His corrections. After the resurrection of Lazarus, the final decision to kill Jesus arrives (John 12).

Many saints have performed more miracles than Jesus, and some of you may have helped or even saved more people than Don Orione or Jesus. Many doctors and surgeons, with modern technology, save more lives than Jesus. Many of our works distribute more bread than Jesus did with the multiplication. Jesus was the least efficient person. As the Messiah, He should have brought peace, defeated poverty, restored the kingdom of Israel, etc.; He did not achieve any of these results.

Some questions for reflection:

• Does my apostolate truly have God at the center?

• Have I ever had to give up some of my projects or ideas to which I was particularly attached? How did I react?

• Am I tied to personal or congregational protagonism, or am I open

to the apostolate of the entire Church?

• Do I collaborate with my brothers and share with them the choices to be made?

• How much collaboration is there with the structures of the Diocese or other congregations?

Sufferance

After the apostolate, I want to talk about suffering, as an aspect in which to live in practice what we have learned in recent days. I don't mean to say that our apostolate is destined to fail and make us suffer; I know that in most cases it goes well and gives us beautiful satisfactions, but in those moments, you don't need special help. But there are also difficult moments, and there we need guidance. Are difficulties and sufferings the result of our mistakes and therefore to be discarded, or do they have value in themselves? Saint Paul says to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:10-13):

> " *You have followed my teaching, way of life, purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, persecutions that I endured. Yet from all these things the Lord delivered me. In fact, all who want to live religiously in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and charlatans will go from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived.."*

During Holy Week, we reflect on the mystery of the suffering and death of Christ. For us, it must be clear that Christ's death on the cross was not an accident or a mistake. Jesus could have chosen a path of glory and success; instead, He chose to embrace the condition of the poorest, the persecuted, and He lived and died as one of them. This choice not only gave hope to all who suffer but also gave value to suffering itself. In Matthew 5, we have two Beatitudes that speak more directly to this: "*Blessed are those who*

mourn" (5:4); "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*" (5:10). There is also the conclusion of the Beatitudes which, speaking more directly, says: "*Blessed are you when they insult you*, etc." (5:11) In the first, there is the assertion: "for they will be comforted". This gives hope for a resolution of the problems. The second one, however, does not say that God will solve your problem, nor that He will prevent people from hurting or killing you, and it does not say that He will avenge you. The blessedness is in the suffering itself because it becomes the means to ensure the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as He saved the world through His suffering, so our suffering, on many occasions, can contribute to the salvation of the world, and naturally of ourselves. Furthermore, we can notice that while in many of the Beatitudes the reward is placed in a future form ("they will be..."), in this one, it is in the present ("yours is the kingdom...")

The word "mourn" in the Beatitude should not be misunderstood as complaining or as something indicating a passive attitude, something that prevents us from acting. The meaning of this word in the Bible is the opposite. The Bible is full of mourning people. In Ezekiel 27, the inhabitants of Jerusalem mourn because the city is full of corrupt people, but these mourning men react by doing penance and fasting and they will be the only ones saved. Mary, at the foot of the cross, is in a mourning attitude, and her mourning turns into compassion and therefore unites her to God in His plan of salvation. So, this mourning must be interpreted as suffering "with" those who suffer unjustly. We need to unite this beatitude with the eighth one: blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. We need an active mourning that does not surrender to evil.

The powerful people of the world like sadness, because it numbs our conscience, and if we react to it, they persecute us. Taking the side of the poor and the rejected means taking a stand against the structures of sin that have created poverty and rejection.

Let's focus a bit on suffering itself.

There are different types of suffering: some are physical, others are psychological, emotional, or moral. Some are due to our mistakes, others to the transgression of other people without any participation from us. Some can be avoided, others cannot. Some seem to be useful like when we work hard to achieve a goal, others are useless like when we suffer from a headache. Some leave room for hope, others present none, as in the case of an incurable disease. Since they are different, they will have a distinct impact on us, but what really makes a difference is our attitude towards them.

There is a beautiful movie that can show us what I mean: its title is "Of Gods and Men". It is the true story of a group of Trappist monks who lived in a Muslim village in Algeria. They were very loved and respected by the local population, but in the country, fundamentalists began to kill Christians and burn churches, and so these monks, who were all French, became a possible target. After a first threatening visit to the monastery by the terrorists, the community had to decide whether to leave and return safely to France or stay there facing the ever-increasing possibility of death. The local people wanted them to stay. After much prayer and discernment, they all decided to stay. The superior gave this beautiful explanation: "We continue our activity here among these people, we do not seek death, and as far as possible, we will try to

avoid it, but if it comes, we will accept it in the name of the Lord". In the end, the terrorists took them all as hostages and killed them. They were beatified on December 8, 2018. What we seek in our apostolate is not suffering or persecution, but the consistency of our life and witness. This will require suffering, and we accept it, we try to solve what is possible, we offer with faith what is impossible.

In summary, we could say that suffering takes on its greatest value when it is accepted for love's sake: I must choose between loving and therefore accepting to suffer, or closing myself off. We accept suffering because love is greater.

What suffering does for us:

1. It teaches us faith and trust in Providence: God will not abandon us. Think again about efficiency. Everything should be okay, perfect, functional, yielding good results. A defeat or a situation we feel unable to face will remind us of the purpose for which we are there and also the fact that Jesus is the only Savior and we are there for Him; His ways are not like ours.

2. It helps us better understand the mystery of Christ and His love for humanity; about Jesus Himself, the letter to the Hebrews says: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8). Most founders of religious congregations, throughout history, had a great devotion to the spirituality of the cross. In today's society, especially in Western society, there is a strong movement of people who want to get rid of the cross. Many people ask to ban crosses from schools or public places, and they do so in the name of freedom of conscience and religion, out of respect for those who do not believe. It's not like that; there is much more. I

lived for 7 years near a Hindu temple and it did not take away my freedom. If this applies to religion, it should apply to any product that we might not like. It is a fact that the cross reminds us of weakness, defeat, death. Modern society is a society of success, victory, power, self-assertion, the opposite of what Jesus' cross preaches.

3. It helps us better understand the suffering of others and therefore teaches us compassion. Often when a poor person knocks on our door, we feel disturbed, inwardly criticizing him because he doesn't work, because he drinks, because he is dirty and doesn't take care of himself, because he is rude or deceitful, etc. All these thoughts, even if they correspond to truth, are ways of justifying our negative feelings and the fact that we don't want to help them. When we find ourselves in a situation of need, we start to see things differently, from a different perspective, and become less critical, more understanding. "The world proposes fun, enjoyment, distraction, amusement, and tells us that this is what makes life good. The world ignores, looks the other way when there are problems of illness or pain in the family or around it. The world does not want to cry: it prefers to ignore painful situations, cover them up, hide them. Much energy is spent on escaping from situations where suffering is present, believing that it is possible to disguise reality, where never, ever can the cross be missing." (Francis, GeE 75)

4. It is necessary to strengthen us. There is nothing in life that comes cheap. Whatever is precious requires hard work to achieve it, and hard work entails physical pain and the pain of having to give up other things. There was once a boy who watched a cocoon breaking and the young butterfly emerging. It was struggling, pushing with its

shoulders to break the cocoon and make room to come out. The boy felt pity and, to help the butterfly, broke the cocoon with his hands so that the butterfly could come out easily. When the day passed, the other butterflies began to fly, but this one couldn't. The boy was disappointed. What had happened is that the effort to break the cocoon with its shoulders not only served to come out but was a first exercise that strengthened shoulders so that when the butterfly started to fly, they could bear the tension of the flapping. That butterfly lacked that exercise. Those who have everything easy in life will fall at the first small difficulty. People who have never been sick in life do not necessarily live longer; sometimes a simple flu can kill them because they have never built-up antibodies.

5. It helps us to appreciate many things in our lives that we otherwise take for granted and to be grateful for them. Think about life, health, a good home, the opportunity to study, friendship, etc. These are truly great treasures, but often we only come to realize it when we lose them.

6. If accepted positively, suffering helps us discover many qualities and potentials that we have inside and of which we were not aware. Sometimes I have visited homes for street children. It is incredible to see how skilled, intelligent, clever, and capable they are of getting out of any difficult situation. Sometimes our seminarians, who are well protected and for whom everything is ready, do not know how to perform the simplest task without coming and asking for explanations ten times. After the resurrection of Jesus, Christians were confined among the Jews. It was due to persecution that they were forced to flee from Israel and go all over the world, carrying with them also the "Word". The consequence was that not only

Israel but the whole world had the opportunity to become Christian, and this was because of the persecutions, not because of power.

7. Suffering is necessary to keep us humble: when we feel weak or in danger, we learn that we need someone else's help. We know that pride is one of the greatest enemies of our life and also of community life. It is good that sometimes we are forced to ask for help from others. Jesus, while carrying the cross on Calvary, fell and had to allow someone else to help him. He must have felt humiliated, ashamed of having forced poor Simon to bear such punishment. My mother was not a proud person but, in her life, she always worked hard. She managed a large family, yet she always found time to help others. She never had to ask for help from anyone because she had acquired so many skills. Until the age of 87, she was moving from 5:00 in the morning until evening. A few years ago, she fell and broke her ankle. Doctors had to apply plaster and told her to avoid putting her foot on the ground for forty days. She never complained about the pain, but the thing she found very difficult to accept was having to depend on someone else, or as she put it: "being served". It was a necessary and beneficial experience.

8. Our suffering, if lived with faith, sets an example for many Christians we meet. In every nation, at the beginning of Christianity, there are martyrs, and they are honored and are the solid foundations of those churches.

Suffering is a way of purification. We have promised our whole life to the Lord, but there are so many parts that we do not want to let go. I would like to present a purification on four levels that sometimes the Lord imposes on us through our apostolate.

I- The first step is purification from attachment to material things: when we lose something, we learn to let go of things that are not really important and focus on those that are essential. This is more or less what we have said so far. We do apostolate but feel unable to achieve many of the things we have planned.

II- The second level of purification comes when in our apostolate we work hard to help people and they do not appreciate what we do, they are not grateful, they always demand more, they ruin what we do for them. Perhaps the Lord is asking us: for whom do you work, for me or for yourself? For my kingdom or for your gratification?

III- A third level, higher than the previous one, occurs when those who do not understand us and do not appreciate us are not those we help, who after all are uneducated people, but are our confrères or even superiors. They should know what apostolate is and, instead of supporting us, they criticize us because we arrive late for community moments, because we spend money, because we overdo it; sometimes they even say that we work out of pride, etc. I am talking about a situation where I am working conscientiously and am wrongly criticized. The Lord may be teaching us: are you working my way, or your way?

IV- The final and even higher level of purification is when I feel that God Himself does not appreciate me, does not listen to my requests that are not made for myself but for the good of those for whom I am working. Our prayer becomes cold, we feel that God is distant, despite the fact that we do everything for Him. Remember when Martha was scolded by Jesus after all the work she had done in preparing dinner for him? The preference fell on the lazy Mary. It is

the moment of total surrender. Martha had to learn unconditional love. She seems to have learned well and shows it at the time of Lazarus' death, in the faith response she gives to Jesus. At this level we can also place Jesus' final cry on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Followed by: "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit."

God does not want us to work for Him, not even to do His work, but He asks us to allow Him to do His work in us. "It is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me." "It is in your weakness that I can show my strength."

Please remember:

- Suffering is never the final stage, but a preparation for a higher joy, which often requires us to be purified.

- It is never a closed room with no exits, but a door to open to enter glory.

- In suffering, we are never alone; Jesus is accompanying us from the Cross.

- If we express the desire to join Him on the cross, He takes us seriously and fulfills our desire.

- Any suffering we are able to endure and offer to Him, immediately becomes grace for the whole world.

- Those who have fewer sufferings are not necessarily the holiest people. It is possible that the Lord knows how weak they are, and that they are not yet ready and would soon collapse.

- Joy does not always come from the solution of a problem, but is an inner joy, a gift of the Spirit that comes from understanding the value

of those moments.

Some questions to reflect on:

- In what area am I afraid of suffering? (Physical, being rejected, being judged, etc.)

- How do I react when I encounter a problem?

- How do I react when I am corrected, misunderstood, etc.?

- While watching Jesus on the cross, have I ever desired to be more united to Him?

Till the end. (Keep your eyes fixed on high)

After 5 days of discussions about our lives, the different aspects of our spirituality, apostolate, etc., what else could be added?

I hope that during these days I have not scared you, bored you, or discouraged you from being good servants.

I just wanted to invite each of you to ask yourselves: tomorrow, when I return to normal life, what should I do? Will I simply continue to do everything as before? During this retreat, did something happen in me, at the emotional level? Have I felt, at least on some occasions, the desire to do something differently, with a different purpose?

I hope you have understood that in my analysis, I have never doubted the quality of your life, nor have I questioned the fact that you work hard to serve the poor. My goal was to help you see things from a different perspective, that of God, that of Don Orione. It's a bit like saying that we are artists carving a beautiful statue. If we only work sitting in front, we will be able to take care of all the details we see and make sure that, from that position, everything appears beautiful and perfect. But staying only in front of the statue does not allow us to see the details of the sides, and even less those of the back of it. To manage those details, we have to move from our position and walk around our work; only then can we perfect all the parts and say that now our work is a masterpiece.

Usually, we start an activity with the aim of being useful to others. This is a great starting point, but we cannot stop there; we must progress in our intentions to allow our work to move from being

merely a social or philanthropic activity to a spiritual/apostolic activity. According to Saint Teresa of Avila, progress comes only from embracing the Cross. We must work on ourselves and our intentions to achieve spiritual freedom in whatever we do, so that it is not just our work for God and for the poor, but it becomes God's work for the poor (and also for us). This requires a purification of our minds, which I spoke about in the last meeting. Any progress in our spiritual life, as well as in the apostolic one, requires from us the will to embrace the cross of Jesus. Don Orione understood this well from the beginning when he exclaimed that our small Congregation was born on a Good Friday and will grow only if it remains at the foot of the cross. Are we afraid of the cross? I try to be concrete in what I am saying: are we willing to accept sacrifices, hard work, to give up comfort, free time, hobbies, when required, to walk the path of Calvary behind Jesus?

The first exercise to do is to learn to focus on priorities, to analyze, in all activities, not only the content of what we do or the purpose of the work, but our mentality. The old philosopher Socrates used "Know yourself" as a motto for his life. Inner freedom is not something guaranteed, especially for us who want to be servants of God, but without it, it is very difficult to work in a way that is according to the mind of God and where He makes the choices.

When looking at things and making plans, there is a big difference between the perspective of a businessman, the perspective of an administrator, the emotional perspective, and the perspective of the Cross.

- From a businessman's perspective, priorities are set based on the

final gain, structure is more important than the people involved.

- From the administrator's perspective, priorities are set by criteria of efficiency, order, and then rules and regulations are more important than the people involved.

- From an emotional perspective, priorities are set by the emotional gain I get: admiration, friendship, honor, sense of achievement, happiness, comfort, and these are more important than the people and their well-being.

- From the perspective of the Cross, priorities are set by the vision that Jesus had on the cross. In this perspective, the priority is the integral salvation of all the people involved in my work. When I talk about integral salvation, I mean not only physical well-being but also emotional, social, spiritual, and moral well-being. The important goal is that any person who comes to my door receives not only care, or education, or material help, but also feels accepted, understood, appreciated; feels that God is loving him.

Pope Francis, in the message he sent for the World Day of the Sick 2020, said: "Why does Jesus Christ nurture these feelings? Because He himself became weak, experiencing human suffering and receiving refreshment from the Father in turn. In fact, only those who, in the first person have this experience, will be able to comfort others." As we said during last talk, there are many types of suffering, but all can become a gym, a place to train and learn. It often happens that in a congregation there is a poor and difficult house and a rich and comfortable one; which one would you choose? A school, a poor or rich cottolengo, one with large numbers and great honor, and another small and poorly organized, which one

would you choose? Often, we are afraid of fatigue, afraid of failure, afraid of being judged: how many times do we neglect initiatives, possible assignments or jobs, just out of fear! Fear is an obstacle to the need to give ourselves to others and trust in Providence. Often all this is not due to a real lack of faith, but rather the result of unresolved inner problems, wounds not completely healed, negative experiences not re-elaborated in the light of the cross of Christ. Our real question should be: which reality needs more help? Which Jesus would you prefer to go to? But of course, accepting such a challenge means facing poverty, lack of resources, less free time for my hobbies, leaving behind the friends I have here, to go to a place where I don't know anyone. Probably that area is dangerous, more polluted, more at risk, etc. This is the perspective of the Cross. Having the perspective of the Cross requires us to have the courage to say, "Father into your hands, I commend my Spirit." Do we believe that our life is in God's hands?

Let's think for a moment about the experience of the twelve apostles. Several times Jesus recommended them to be humble, to serve, etc., and every time they demonstrated, through their behavior, that they did not understand Jesus' lesson. When they arrived in Jerusalem, on Palm Sunday, they were welcomed by the children with songs; the illusion of power and glory awakened in their hearts. But suddenly Jesus was arrested and condemned to death. Perhaps they expected that at any moment he would perform a great miracle, escape arrest, avoid going up Calvary, or come down from the Cross, as it always happens in movies with the protagonists. Even the soldiers were asking him to do it, "Save yourself if you can." But none of this happened. Jesus died and was placed in a tomb. This

is the moment when their love for Him and their faith in Him were put to the test. Despite the original fear that made them flee from the garden of Gethsemane, they remained united, lost in their minds but united in their spirit, waiting to see what would happen. Their true conversion, the one that makes them ready for the great task of going into the world as apostles, must pass through the experience of losing Jesus, the experience of defeat, the fear of being arrested and put to death like Him. As long as they walked in the shadow of the miracle worker, of the successful preacher, they felt happy and enthusiastic but they were not yet true apostles.

We are experts in what we do, our works are really good, often in the whole region or state there are no institutions like ours, but here is where the danger of drifting away and falling into a business perspective arises.

Have you ever experienced a strong setback in life, a failure, a loss? How did you react? How much did this experience influence your life, your vocation? What did you learn? In that moment were you able to see God at work?

Saint Paul tells us: (Romans 8:31-39):

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? …

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Here we also have a beautiful phrase from Pope Francis (Gaudete et Exsultate, 129-130):

"At the same time, holiness is parrhesia: it is boldness, it is the

missionary impulse that leaves a mark on this world. So that this may be possible, Jesus himself comes to meet us and repeats with serenity and firmness: 'Do not be afraid' (Mark 6:50). 'And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). These words allow us to walk and serve with an attitude full of courage that the Holy Spirit aroused in the Apostles, urging them to proclaim Jesus Christ. Boldness, enthusiasm, speaking with freedom, apostolic fervor, all this is included in the word parrhesia, a word with which the Bible also expresses the freedom of an existence that is open, because it is available for God and for brothers (cf. Acts 4:29; 9:28; 28:31; 2 Cor 3:12; Eph 3:12; Heb 3:6; 10:19).”

He then adds:

"Blessed Paul VI mentioned among the obstacles to evangelization precisely the lack of parrhesia: 'the lack of fervor, all the more serious because it arises from within.' How many times do we feel pulled to stop on the comfortable shore! But the Lord calls us to sail offshore and to cast our nets into deeper waters (cf. Luke 5:4). He invites us to spend our lives in His service. Clinging to Him, we have the courage to put all our charisms at the service of others. May we feel impelled by his love (cf. 2 Cor 5:14) and say with Saint Paul: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!' (1 Cor 9:16).”

Allow me to tell you two episodes from the life of Don Orione. We know how courageous and strong he was throughout his life. But not everything was as easy and pleasant as it seems from the outside. The early years of the congregation were marked by rapid growth but also by the alternating support of Bishop Bandi of Tortona, with an often fluctuating and worried mood. One day he would

encourage him to act, and the next day he would ask him to stop. In truth, the Congregation was fragile in its structure due to the lack of people and funds. In addition to the many concerns, in August 1908, Don Gaspare Goggi, in whom he had placed so much hope, died, and a month later, he also lost his mother. How did Don Orione react to the losses? Providence sent him a new challenge to which he responded with his usual generosity; in fact, in December, there was the great earthquake that devastated the cities of Reggio Calabria and Messina. Don Orione left the staggering congregation in the hands of Don Sterpi and went to help the needy. He stayed there for about three years.

A second challenge struck him some years later. While he was in Messina during the earthquake, Don Orione was falsely accused of frequenting prostitutes and of having contracted syphilis from them. Although the accusation was soon proven false, it was later spread, as a rumor against him by one of the priests of the diocese, jealous of the fame that Don Orione was gaining for his work and fearing that he would become too powerful. How did Don Orione react? At first, he tried to pretend that nothing was happening; then he asked, unsuccessfully, for an intervention from his bishop; finally, when the matter was getting out of control, he decided to seize the opportunity of the Eucharistic Congress in Buenos Aires and, under the pretext of visiting his houses there, he left for Latin America. Let us listen to Don Orione's own words in three short excerpts.

The first is taken from a letter to a friend, Senator Boggiano Pico.

> "*Don Sterpi wrote to me about everything you do for the Sons of Divine Providence; this, I confess, truly moves me, and it is*

one of my greatest comforts in this exile of mine, half voluntary and more than half forced."

Before leaving Tortona, Don Orione had gone to visit the bishop, Monsignor Grassi, who was quite ill, but since he couldn't see him, during the journey wrote him a letter of which he also sent a copy to Don Sterpi.

"*Do not fear that I will take too much power in Tortona: You know, my good Father, that we have never interfered in the government of the Diocese, neither directly nor indirectly; only when Your Excellency spoke to me of some of your sorrows, I tried to give you some comfort. Excellency, with that love of a son with which I have always loved and served you, I humbly beg you in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Madonna not to want to die like this. You know that attempts have been made to cover me in mud, and what mud! For four years, I have been waiting for a word from my Bishop in my defense: the slander has spread so much in the Diocese and beyond, that even my young students know it! Priests and laymen are talking about it. I have always remained silent, I have always suffered and prayed, but I am not a stone or a rock [:] it is about the good name, and what a priest must hold most dear: his honor. We have turned to our Church and our Bishop... I have never asked for trials: I do not wish ill upon anyone, but good for all: I forgive everyone, I would give my life for everyone. In prayer, in silence, and in hope, I have patiently waited and with full confidence as a son for a word from my Bishop and Father, saying: it is not true. From my Church in Tortona, which I have always loved and served as one loves a mother, the word has*

not come. Oh, my good Father, please do not die like this!"

Unfortunately, the bishop never had the chance to read the letter because he died before receiving it. We do not know if someone else opened the envelope instead of him; we only know the content from the copy that Don Sterpi had received from Don Orione himself.

After two years of work in Argentina, Don Orione received from Don Sterpi the information that the Vatican had decided to send an Apostolic Visitor to investigate the state of the Congregation and its functioning. Don Orione replied to Don Sterpi:

"*This Visit is, and we must consider it, an extraordinary grace from the Lord, however much it may have been provoked by appeals, which have not been communicated to me until today, by people not well disposed towards the Little Work, or hostile to me personally. And they waited until I was away. I have known about this turmoil for some time, and when, almost two years ago, I left Italy, I threw myself into the sea a bit like Jonah, and I always hoped that my absence would calm the storm, and leave the poor boat of the Congregation in peace.*

I looked for work here, my dear priests, also to have a reason to delay my return, and to justify not only in the eyes of the people, but also in your eyes, my absence, so as not to make you suffer, keeping you in the dark about certain painful sufferings of mine, especially - personal ones.

Above all, I hoped that, not seeing me, they would calm down. - It seems that it is not so, and patience, my children, let us take everything from the holy hand of God, and forward in the Lord!

Let us not afflict ourselves, but let us love the Lord and the Holy Church more.

Let us bless the Lord, in everything and for everything that God will want to arrange or allow: surely it will all be for our good.

Let us love the Lord in friends, and love Him in enemies, small or great, let us pray for all, and also for those who make us suffer: let us adore the Lord always, let us thank Him always in silence, and in hope, and in great charity, even if they were to take out our eyes, as long as they leave us with the heart to love them."

As you can understand, the generosity that Don Orione applied in both situations made it possible for the Congregation in the first case to spread well to Reggio Calabria and Messina, and in the second, in Argentina with the opening of 15 new houses.

During the three years in Argentina, he worked harder than ever. He focused on charity, leaving all other concerns in the hands of the Lord. Let's listen to what he wrote to the apostolic visitor, Abbot Caronti, speaking of his work in Saenz Peña:

"If I knew I were to stay here, I would ask you to let me go to the Chaco to die there, that is, to consume myself and live as a true Missionary, entrusted to the Lord.

Saenz Pena is a city of about 20 thousand inhabitants with another 10 thousand scattered in the surrounding villages at enormous distances, it takes hours and hours to go there by car. There are Protestants of various sects who work and have evangelical halls, churches, libraries, etc., there is the synagogue, because many are Jews there – as for the Catholics

a room functions as a church, and the altar consists of three wooden planks nailed to two trestles, - then there is a small room to sleep in. [...].

I have a desire: to love the Lord and to love the Holy Church, the souls, the poor children, the abandoned, the poor class, the workers, the communists: I would like to die for these my brothers, and I would like to be forgotten by everyone, to live and die forgotten by everyone, under everyone's feet, and only love Jesus, the Holy Church, and everyone, and lose myself in the Lord: - I, most unworthy, who have sinned so much, who have been so bad with the Lord and with the Madonna, and have not treasured the gifts of the Lord! - Help me, dear Father Visitor, help me!!".

Some questions for reflection:

- How did I feel during this retreat?
- What was the topic that inspired me the most?
- Was there any reflection that disturbed me?
- What will change in my life now that I am returning home?

Appendix 1.
Texts for reflection

The Desert

Some questions for reflection

- Which of the first three characters touched me? Did it disturb me or inspire me?

- What are the points of my life that make me uncomfortable? Am I able to face them with confidence in the future?

- Do I realize that God needs my testimony to send a message of conversion to someone else?

- Am I willing to accept that God uses my weakness, my incapacity, my fear?

ORIONINE TEXTS

I recommend, be silent; away with all worldly noise, away with every thought, every concern even for good; I will do this: I will regulate myself like this... away with all this, and silence: "Let all creatures be silent." These days are for you, only for you, rest in the adorable heart of Jesus: these are the days of health, the days of grace and mercy, Our Lord himself gave us the example: He withdrew into the desert for forty days to be silent and to pray. Again I recommend it to you, be silent; silence and recollection; internal and external recollection. Recollection means great custody of our senses;

therefore great modesty in the eyes; whoever wants to see everything, watch everything, who is there, who is not there, what is being done, what is not being done... that one will not do the exercises well. Modesty in behavior, in your whole being, recollection in everything. Put a brake on your imagination, on your imagination and remember what our Lord said: I will lead the soul into solitude and there I will speak to its heart.

****

I, you see, am still here with these dear clerics in the country house (Mornico), which you visited with your father, the evening before leaving. This is one of the first letters I write, not having attended to anything else in these days, except to meditate, in solitude, and in silence, on the benefits of God upon me and upon the Work of Divine Providence. In silence and quietness, I pray for all my children, and for you in particular, because my heart tells me that you can do so much good if you respond to the graces that God has given you and to the greater ones he reserves for you. Here I hear voices, which the noise of the city does not say at all or would take away from me hearing: I feel more directly under the eye and under the hand of God, and that God also wants something from you. And for this reason I write to you.

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In silence we seek our soul, we awaken ourselves, and our Lord, our whole soul is found and formed in the presence of God, and the splendor of God is above us, and then we feel that we are no longer alone. And in the silence and solitude of silence we will feel the inner guest, the Master who resides within us, as St. Augustine says in the

"de magistro", - and a heavenly light that enlightens us and the joys and beauties of inner life and the emotions of a more intimate and higher spiritual life.

****

Dear my children, to live alone with God! These words are little understood in youth..., but, when one has made the sad experience of life, oh how much one feels the need to invigorate the exhausted heart! Solitude without God will rest the spirit, but hardens the heart: it is a flowery and fragrant plain, but which has only a pale and mortuary sun.

Solitude instead with God is a warm and sweet atmosphere, which alone knows how to heal the torments of the heart! - God alone! - Oh how useful and comforting it is to want God alone as a witness!

God alone! is holiness in its highest degree. - God alone! is happiness in all that is most exquisite. - God alone! is the most solid assurance of entering heaven one day. - God alone, my children, God alone!

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And it seemed to me that there was a beneficial and calm atmosphere around my soul!... And then I saw behind me the reason for the present pains: I saw that instead of seeking in my work to please God alone, for years I had been begging for the praise of men, and I was in a continuous search, in a continuous effort for someone who could see me, appreciate me, applaud me, and I concluded within myself: we must start a new life even here: work seeking God alone!

Work under the gaze of God, of God alone! Oh! yes, there is in these words a whole new rule of life, there is everything needed for the Work of Divine Providence: the gaze of God!

We must start a new life, and we must start from here: work seeking God alone! Work under the gaze of God! of God alone!

The gaze of God is like a dew that strengthens, it is like a luminous ray that fertilizes and expands: let us therefore work without noise and without respite, let us work under the gaze of God, of God alone!

The human gaze is a scorching ray that fades even the most resistant colors: it would be in our case like the icy breath of the wind that bends, curves, ruins the still tender stem of this poor little plant.

Every action done to make noise and to be seen loses its freshness in the eyes of the Lord: it is like a flower passed through many hands and that is barely presentable.

O poor Work of Divine Providence, be the flower of the desert that grows, opens, blooms, because God has told it, and that does not alter, if the passing bird sees it, or if the blowing wind scatters its newly formed leaves.

For our soul and for all our life: God alone! God alone!

The Vocation

Some questions for reflection:

1) What brought me here until today? What attracted me and what gave me the courage to continue?

2) Is there something more that I feel I should do? What blocks me or puts obstacles in my way?

3) What do I do to train my body to respond more faithfully and effectively to the inspirations of the Spirit?

4) To what extent do personal satisfaction calculations, career, fear of the future, not make me free in my choices?

ORIONINE TEXTS

To love Jesus Christ and to make him known and loved through our deeds,... to love and serve the Pope, our holy father, the universal head of the Church and Vicar of God among men, is the greatest work we can do on this earth for the glory of the Lord, and it is the end of our poor Institute of Providence. Instaurare omnia in Christo: - by the grace of God, to renew everything in the doctrine and charity of Jesus Christ crucified, by implementing the papal program, especially regarding the freedom of the Pope and the Church and the unity of the separated churches. For this purpose, which is our life, I am certain that Our Lord Jesus Christ regards with the sweetest eye of a father the will we have to unite in order to love him more and make him loved, and to serve him more faithfully and more strongly

united in his holy Catholic Church, our dearest mother. (from letter to his religious called to exercises 3-July-1902) Scr. 70,2-3

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My dear son, the way of religious vocation is certainly difficult and thorny, but the love of God makes it sweet and smooth. Make yourselves every day more in love with our Lord and our most holy Mother of Paradise. Disdain for yourself and the world, desire for heaven, affection for poverty, practice of prayer and mortification.

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Whoever is called to the service of God must prepare for temptation, and the vocation, to become firm, needs to have faced and overcome the good battles against the devil and against ourselves and humanity. To win these battles it is necessary to be generous with Jesus Christ, and to give oneself entirely to him and, especially for those who begin as you do now, to put all confidence in the superior, and to open to him with humility like a child and with holy simplicity his soul.

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And not only let us not abandon the vocation, but let us live the vocation! Certainly, the tepid do not live the vocation, nor do the neglectful, nor those distant from the spirit and from the mortified, humble, active life of the Congregation; nor would those diverted by secular ideas and feelings live it, unworthy of good religious, the lax, or those who shy away from observing the rules, who flee from the gaze of the superiors. We must live the vocation, as serious religious, as religious who truly want to sanctify themselves and sanctify souls, as religious who know how to overcome and deny themselves, as

religious who intend to observe the sacred promises and vows with which they have given and consecrated themselves to the Lord.

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Many times Jesus spoke to the crowds that followed him; but he also spoke to his disciples. Under the name disciples, the apostles are also included. Therefore, Jesus spoke to his disciples, that is, to those who had given themselves to his following, desiring nothing other than to practice his teachings, follow his examples, and live, in some way, his same life. And he said to them: "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world..."(Mt 5:13). As wretched as we are, as unworthy, even we, dear children, have approached the Lord more than the crowds. The Christian people, if they want to be truly Christian, follow the teachings of the Lord and observe the commandments. We who, by divine call, have taken a step further than simple Christians, have embraced not only what is prescribed for Christians, but also what is advised, and have put ourselves in the following of Jesus in poverty of spirit, in humble obedience, in purity, in religious life, doing true discipleship. We are rarely the disciples of Jesus Christ, the successors, continuators of the apostles. In short, we are those who must be, by vocation, closer to the Lord, those who must walk at the sides of Jesus and follow him. Jesus spoke to his disciples who listened to him, but to all those who would follow him afterwards; and therefore also to us who, at the distance of 2000 years, are the continuators, successors of the first disciples. In fact, like them, we have left our home, our country, our family, all that we held dear, people and things, and we have put ourselves behind Jesus. He did not speak only to those who listened to him then, but those words that passed through all times and generations reaching

us, Jesus says to us, his disciples. Hear what great words Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth". Now if the salt fades and does not give the taste it must give, with what will it be salted then?. When there is soup without salt, you know what nausea, what disgust one feels, you have experienced it: even water, if it does not have those given quantities of salts, harms health instead of benefiting it, and would not become more digestible. Jesus called his disciples "salt of the earth"; and he added: "If the salt becomes tasteless, how can it be made salty again?"

Sin and Love

Some questions:

1) Have I ever experienced God's mercy within me?

2) What are my weaknesses? Can I accept them? What actions do I take to overcome them?

3) Am I able to prioritize my sister/brother and their well-being?

4) Can I be merciful, patient, humble?

5) Do I know how to spend time listening to my sisters, encouraging them, making them feel welcomed?

ORIONINE TEXTS

Oh my dear Felice, how great peace and quiet and happiness you would possess, if you cut off every vain concern, every thought that still attracts you to the world, and thought only of healthy and divine things, and placed all your hope in God and consecrated yourself totally to the Lord! The world passes away, and the desires of the world pass away also. What is man's life on earth? Smoke that passes away. Look, this voice of mine is God insinuating himself into your heart and sweetly drawing you to himself: do not let this voice pass away, which is not my voice: lift up your heart and respond to the Lord that you will do everything he wants from you, that he forgives you your sins and your negligences: that you will love him and preach him to souls and make him loved by all souls, that you will speak of him and do his holy will in all things. - Oh truly happy you, because

God will be consoled in you and in you will be consoled your mother and the souls of the Lord and even the holy angels will draw near to you! You see, my dear son, I have never seen God like this, I have never felt him speak to my heart more sweetly and more strongly: I now find myself so penetrated by him and dominated by him, that I seem to stand face to face with him. The sweetest fire of his divine mercy (burns me) ....

How did Jesus love and how does he love? He loves with a supernatural love, that is, with a love that does not stop at the physical qualities of the person, but pays attention above all to see in the creature the work of the Creator, she who must honor with all her actions, that is, the divine Majesty. Charity is defective if it turns only to people of our own temperament, of our own nature, of our own ideas, because we must love everyone and even more those who seem to us to be more wicked, more ruined by the work of sin. Let us not think that we should love only those who love us and do good to us; even worldly people, even pagans are capable of this love! Let us remember well, Jesus loved us, but with the sacrifice of Calvary! And we too must love with sacrifice even those who harm us, who offend us, who speak ill of us, who can in any way hurt us. We must always love, even if it costs us dearly, because here is all the strength of our holy Religion. Above all, charity must be tolerant and compassionate so much, always compassionate as Jesus was compassionate.

Is there perhaps something sweeter, and that inspires more to live

in humility, to love God in holy poverty, in joy and serene joy, than the smile of the Child Jesus? Is there anything that moves and makes us cry more deeply and consolingly, than that face, rapture of the Angels, and reflecting that, one day, that face will be slapped and beaten, covered with spittle and blood? And what crown will ever pierce that divine forehead! And the hands and feet and the Heart? Ah Jesus! King of love, who loved us more than your life, how will we remain insensitive? Did you not come to suffer for us, to bear our miseries, to repair for our sins, to redeem us, to free us from our evils? Did you not come to drown us in divine love? You came for all, for the great as well as for the small, to give peace, salvation, and insatiable love to all people of good will! Jesus, salvation and love of the human race! And so that we learn to love him without reserve, without interruption and perfectly, Jesus calls us to the Crib, as he once called the shepherds: at the school of Bethlehem he wants to infuse his spirit in us, and attract us to the beauty of humility, poverty, charity; he wants to found in our hearts the kingdom of these three great virtues, without which, my children, we will never truly be his disciples.

The Lord will not look at us according to our misery and our sins, but according to the greatness of His goodness and the multitude of His mercies; and he will hear the prayer of us his poor servants, if we will have and live of his charity; and, under the guidance of his grace, he will guide us along the path of peace and self-sacrifice to the feet of his Holy Church of Rome, which is our Mother and the Mother of the living; and the Lord will bless and sanctify our steps and the steps of our Congregation, and will carry it with heavenly blessing to spread

the tents of God; and even the very ends of the earth will become our dwelling place, if we will be humble and faithful sons of the Church of Rome and live of the charity without limit of Jesus Christ, and only seeking Jesus Christ and his kingdom, that is, souls and souls and souls!

The Prayer

Some questions for reflection:

1) Apart from moments of communal prayer, how much time do I dedicate to personal prayer?

2) During personal prayer, what do I do? What type of prayer suits me best?

3) How connected is my meditation to my daily life and apostolate?

4) When I listen to or read the Word of God, do I feel directly challenged? Am I aware that God is speaking to me and asking me to do something?

ORIONINE TEXTS

And Jesus in the Holy Gospel has always instilled, advised, commanded prayer. Jesus prayed always. Let's see how much prayer in the life of Jesus. Jesus prayed, Jesus prayed and prayed so much. Oh, how the Lord prayed! He prayed by day, he prayed by night; he withdrew into the desert to pray; he withdrew into the garden of olives and prayed; he entered the temple and prayed; he prayed mentally, he prayed vocally, with his mouth, in a vital way. He prayed vitally because his life, his actions were all a consecration to divine love, to the love of the Father. Jesus also prayed on the cross.

Meditation must be done well, methodically, as in the novitiate. With it, a true work of the faculties of the soul is reactivated, the

supernatural affections are aroused. If we will be men of meditation, we will stand firm, we will bear with patience the adversities of life, we will find strength and courage to overcome the temptations of the enemy.

The first characteristic of piety is this, to be interior, internal; it must touch our spirit; it must come from the heart; it must touch our heart. We must not content ourselves with singing, with raising praises, or with external forms of worship. We must be very careful even in our practices of piety: that there is no formalism. We must strive to find in it the aroma, the soul, the fragrance of piety that must come from the heart. Therefore, even in our practices of piety, we must guard against formalism, materialism, external practices of piety. Piety does not reside there; piety must be internal, it must come out in a pulsating form of life; we must give to the practices of piety the full adherence of the will, and, as when one bows, for example, bows his head to his superior, that bow to have value, to count for something, must express the intimate act, the internal adherence, the internal respect for the superior, if that external act lacked this, it would be an act, I do not say of hypocrisy, but, certainly, not complete.

Do we have the spirit of prayer? This spirit is supremely necessary for us priests and especially for religious. Saint Paul says that the Holy Spirit prays in the hearts of the saints with unutterable groans (with groans that cannot be expressed in words) (cf. Rom 8:26). This is the spirit of prayer. It always prays in the depths of the soul. A sign

of having the spirit of prayer is to have the chest and heart burning and inflamed with the love of God and neighbor. To have thoughts always and generally turned and tending to good and heavenly things and to zeal for the glory of God. To maintain a habitual recollection of the spirit. To find no taste, but disgust, for earthly things. To find peace and delight in holy and divine things, in the Church, in the works of one's priestly ministry. Finally, to do prayers, meditation, the divine office, the Mass, prayer with relish. The first means to obtain the spirit of prayer is certainly to pray, is to ask God for the grace of it. It will also help greatly if each one diligently and often examines himself on the purity of intention in everything he does: if what he seeks is always the glory of God or not, if he seeks what is of God or if he seeks himself, his own things and self-love and not the love of the Lord. As long as we seek ourselves, we will never have the spirit of prayer. As long as we seek our own satisfaction, our well-being, our personal advantage, esteem, honor, distinguished positions, our heart is already occupied, there is no longer a place, there is no longer room to receive the spirit of God, which is the spirit of prayer. The spirit of prayer is such a spirit that takes us out of ourselves, destroys all earthly and finite things, and leaves only God to reign.

The morning hours bring us the gift of knowing how to pray, and it is in meditation, that is, in reflection on the great moral and dogmatic truths, that the sources of the soul are opened to us. Indeed, morning prayer and especially meditation are the great means of giving our day and our life all their spiritual fruitfulness.

In the Spiritual Exercises we can, indeed we must, strengthen ourselves in the will to serve God with a generous heart: we must recognize our miseries and weep heartfelt tears for our sins. And then with divine grace, we must lay the foundation of our sanctification, beginning by repairing the negligence of past life and reviving, resurrecting in us the grace of the heavenly religious vocation. The Spiritual Exercises, a quarter are done with the mind, and three quarters, indeed more, four quarters are done with the heart, warmed by the fire of the love of Jesus Crucified. Thus, and only thus, are they done well: they are done with the heart.

Make, O my God, that my whole life be a burnt offering, be a hymn, a sublime song of divine charity and total consumption in love for you, O Lord, and for your Holy Church, and for your Vicar on earth, and for your bishops and for all my brothers. Let all this poor life of mine be a single song of divine charity on earth, because I want it to be, by your grace, O Lord, a single song of divine charity in heaven! Make, O Jesus, that a spark at least of this divine fire that burned in the hearts of your saints, that consumed in the love of charity Francis of Assisi who was "all seraphic in ardor," descend upon me and upon all my brothers, O Love Jesus, and unite us perpetually and sweetly in you alone and give us life and blessing!

The Vows

Some questions for reflection:

1) What does "being the bride of Christ" mean to me? How does it

affect the way I live?

2) In what ways do I feel different from my brothers or sisters? Simply because I live in community and I am not married?

3) Does being a missionary inspire in me a desire to live more boldly, prophetically, generously?

ORIONINE TEXTS

But remember well: by coming with us, you come with the poorest and most miserable servants of God, you will have to renounce all earthly interests, all comforts, and forever deny your will. Here you have nothing to hope for except toil and suffering for the love of Jesus crucified, seeking only the love of Jesus and, in Jesus, the souls of Jesus: for if you sought anything else, you would betray entirely the spirit of our profession.

Congregations flourish that maintain the spirit of their foundation, a spirit of prayer, of humility, a spirit of purity, as they were born. Those congregations that then scatter, that grow lukewarm, that abandon themselves, that relax, then also go to die. . .! And, unfortunately, we see that congregations once flourishing are reduced to few people or are entirely removed from the Church. The Lord blesses those who are true religious, those who make religious profession, and not those who, having made religious profession, practice a virtue that is not religious.

My dear clerics, if our Congregation were made up of half of half of

half, but those who remain were pious, were worthy, were as religious should be, it would suffice... The number counts and is power, but virtue counts much more; the value counts much more.

OTHERS

VC 1. Consecrated life, deeply rooted in the examples and teachings of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Spirit. With the profession of the evangelical counsels, the "characteristic traits of Jesus" - virgin, poor, and obedient - "acquire a typical and permanent 'visibility' in the midst of the world", and the gaze of the faithful is drawn to that mystery of the Kingdom of God which already operates in history, but awaits its full realization in heaven.

VC 84. The prophetic character of consecrated life has been strongly emphasized by the Synodal Fathers. It is configured as "a special form of participation in the prophetic function of Christ", communicated by the Spirit to the entire People of God. It is a propheticism inherent in consecrated life itself, because of the radicalism of the following of Christ and the consequent dedication to the mission that characterizes it. The function of a sign, which the Second Vatican Council recognizes in consecrated life, is expressed in the prophetic testimony of the primacy that God and the values of the Gospel have in Christian life. By virtue of this primacy, nothing can be placed before personal love for Christ and for the poor in whom He lives. ...

VC 85. In our world, where the traces of God often seem lost, a strong prophetic testimony by consecrated persons is urgently needed. It will focus above all "on the affirmation of the primacy of God and future goods", which is evident in the following and imitation of Christ chaste, poor, and obedient, totally devoted to the glory of the Father and the love of brothers and sisters. Fraternal life itself is 'active prophecy' in the context of a society that, sometimes without realizing it, has a deep longing for a fraternity without borders. Consecrated persons are asked to offer their testimony with the frankness of the prophet, who is not afraid to risk even his life.

VC 87. The prophetic task of consecrated life is challenged by 'three main challenges' addressed to the Church itself: they are perennial challenges, which are posed in new and perhaps more radical forms by contemporary society, at least in some parts of the world. They directly affect the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, stimulating the Church and, in particular, consecrated persons to highlight and bear witness to "the deep anthropological significance" of these counsels. The choice of these counsels, in fact, far from constituting a impoverishment of authentically human values, is rather proposed as their transfiguration. The evangelical counsels are not to be considered as a negation of the values inherent in sexuality, the legitimate desire to dispose of material goods, and to decide autonomously about oneself. These inclinations, being founded in nature, are good in themselves. Human beings, however, weakened as they are by original sin, are exposed to the risk of translating them into action in a transgressive

way. The profession of chastity, poverty, and obedience becomes a warning not to underestimate the wounds produced by original sin and, while affirming the value of created goods, "relativizes" them by pointing to God as the absolute good. Thus, those who follow the evangelical counsels, while seeking holiness for themselves, propose, so to speak, a "spiritual therapy" for humanity, since they reject the idolatry of creation and somehow make the living God visible. Consecrated life, especially in difficult times, is a blessing for human life and for the Church itself.

Poverty

Some questions for reflection:

1) How do I feel when I lack something? Uncomfortable, angry, do I feel the need to immediately go seek it?

2) Is there something I am particularly attached to? Does this attachment create dependence? Does it prevent me from being open to others?

3) How do I view people who ask me for help?

4) Am I able to give up some of my comfort to go and help another?

ORIONINE TEXTS

"The Congregation would be ruined by those who carry or make a purse for themselves, like Judas. In the holy exercises (spiritual), the preaching father is asked to insist on holy poverty, which is little understood." (from a letter dated July 15, 1929)

"Remember: the day we become rich, we will write 'finis' (the end)." (from a speech in January 1936 in Argentina)

"Poverty is the solid wall of the Congregation."

"To marry poverty means to embody in ourselves the life of the poorest, the most abandoned; of the most rejected, the most

afflicted. This is to marry poverty! It is not enough to say: we live poorly. It is not enough to say: we have promised to be poor! It is not enough! Marrying poverty is to love poverty, the portrait of Christ in our brothers, and to love it so much (...) and to live it so much, as the spouse loves the bride (...)". (from a sermon on October 6, 1939)

"You will have noticed that I said that such a state is a supreme grace, according to God. I said it, because it certainly is not such according to the world; while the true religious renounces all earthly interests, and only the Lord and his most holy cross will be the portion of his inheritance. My dear son, remember that, by coming with us, we are poor, and yet you must live as a poor religious for the love of Jesus Christ, who is our divine example, and he was born poor: he lived poor: he died poor on a cross, even deprived of a little water. But Jesus, our sweet God and Father, is with us, and we lead a happy life, because having Jesus is enough for us. He will be with you, and he will console you, and you will find more spiritual joy and more contentment and happiness in living the poverty and humiliation of our Lord, than if you were rich in all the goods and fleeting pleasures of this poor world."

"... I am not afraid (...) of the pains and trials that divine mercy may deign to send us, but what I fear is the little spirit that is currently manifest in some of our brothers. I see that poverty is not loved, when it is a miracle of Divine Providence that everyone has bread and soup on the table to satisfy themselves: and yet, even having more, by the goodness of the Lord, there are some who are never

content, because they do not care about the spirit of mortification and do not consider themselves to be in houses of Providence and religious poverty. Little obedience is loved, and more thought is given to rising or quickly receiving orders, than to denying oneself; little charity is loved, and murmuring and gossiping about this and that. I know that someone easily roams, that with ease some go out and go for drinks at cafes and occupy themselves with everything except caring for the spiritual, and they occupy themselves with everything and are interested in everything, except truly caring for themselves and amending themselves and truly giving themselves to love the Lord: now this is not good. For charity, do not let me hear such things again."

"St. Thomas Aquinas, speaking of poverty, says that where poverty is cultivated, the spirit of Jesus Christ flourishes, God is felt, and where poverty is abandoned, despised, there enters dissolution and the spirit of the world, even in monasteries, in the most celebrated orders. And you know what Dante also says about a certain illustrious order, precisely because it had abandoned the spirit of poverty. And I will tell you more: if Switzerland is Protestant, I do not think I am wrong in saying that, in part, it is due to the opulence, the wealth of certain monks."

"Let us look to our Lord: if we want to practice the life that Jesus Christ practiced, let us remember that one of the first things is to live the poverty of Jesus Christ, is to detach the heart from goods and from everything that can weaken our spirit. As long as the

Congregation loves poverty and lives it, the Congregation will prosper and will be blessed by the Lord; when our little Congregation ceases to be poor, it will cease to fulfill the mission that God has entrusted to it."

OTHERS

Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium 74

Meekness is another expression of inner poverty, of one who places his trust only in God. In fact, in the Bible, the same word anawim is often used to refer to the poor and the meek. Someone might object: "If I am too meek, they will think I am foolish, that I am stupid or weak." Perhaps it will be so, but let others think so. It is better to always be meek, and our greatest aspirations will be fulfilled: the meek "will inherit the earth", that is, they will see God's promises fulfilled in their lives.

Chastity

Some questions for reflection:

- Am I content with my vocation, with myself, with my work?

- Am I satisfied with how I relate to the people around me?

- Is there a particular friendship in my life that makes me feel a little embarrassed or that I wouldn't want other people to know about?

- Who are the people I am truly attached to and why am I attached to them?

- How do I treat my coworkers or the people I encounter in my work?

- Who are the people I can truly say I love? How do I express my love for them?

- Am I a busy person or do I have a lot of free time?

- Is there anything in my past life that makes me feel guilty, find it difficult to talk about, or think about?

- Do I only love those who love me, accept only those who are grateful, or those who can afford my services, or am I really following the teachings of the Gospel?

ORIONINE TEXTS

The vow of poverty is the offering to God of all that one has or can have materially. The vow of obedience yields to God our head, our will. The vow of chastity also gives to God our thoughts and desires, which must be pure and unblemished.

"To love therefore God and, out of love for God, to love immensely the poor and the little ones of Jesus, and those afflicted by every evil and suffering, comforting them with works of Christian mercy; to love the holy Catholic Church, our mother, and to make her known, loved, and served, along with the Pope, our sweetest father, and thus, in the love of the Lord and our God Jesus Christ, of the Pope, and of souls, to contribute with our little Institute to restore all things in Christ, - constitutes therefore the main purpose of our poor and very small Congregation."

Communicate with brothers only to edify them, communicate with others only to spread the goodness of the Lord:

1) Love Christ in everyone;

2) Serve Christ in the poor;

3) Renew Christ in ourselves and restore everything in Christ;

4) Always save, save all, save at the cost of every sacrifice, with redeeming passion and redeeming holocaust.

Great souls and great and magnanimous hearts; strong and free Christian consciences that feel their mission of truth, of faith, of high hopes, of holy love for God and for men, and that in the light of a great faith, great, precisely "of that" in Divine Providence, walk without stain and without fear, through fire and water, and even amidst the mud of so much hypocrisy, of so much perversity and dissoluteness.

By divine grace, we want, in great humility, to love and serve Jesus

Christ in the neediest poor and we want to serve the poor with the greatest and sweetest spirit of charity.

We must love all men, it's true, and this is theoretical love; but practical love is to show love and charity to those who are near. I'm not saying that we shouldn't love those in Sicily, in Calabria, in France, in Africa; you must pray for all, love all souls in Our Lord! But our "neighbor" is especially those who are closest to us. A Christian writer said it well: "How do you expect people to love those who lead them so far astray?" We say: how do you expect everyone to love those who claim to be full of philanthropy and then are the despair of their family? Outside they are all love, all pity, in their homes they are devils.

Obedience

Some questions for reflection:

- How active am I in the community? How engaged am I in my life?

- Do I consider the community as my family and the house as my home, or do I feel like I'm in a hotel?

- What are the things I want to achieve in life?

- How do I consider God's work in my life, in my society, etc.?

- Is there anything else I could do for the improvement of my community and for the Congregation?

- How do I usually relate to rules and regulations?

- How do I consider our Constitutions: lax, rigorous, feasible, idealistic?

- How much am I willing to sacrifice to remain faithful?

ORIONINE TEXTS

Let yourselves be guided in everything, my dear Hermit brothers, by a lively faith in God, in the Church, and in obedience, never by your own reasoning; but follow in everything and joyfully the way of the cross, the royal way, the holy way, the way of obedience to your Superior: obedience is the golden ring that unites us to Christ and to his Church.

Jesus, in his Nativity, invites us to live as humble religious, and to

fulfill in us the will of the heavenly Father, in an obedience made of love. ... How many lessons of humility, of faith, of simplicity, of poverty, of obedience, of abandonment to Divine Providence does Jesus give us from the crib!

New year, new life: a holy and sanctifying life! New year, life all in Jesus, of Jesus, for Jesus! My Children, let us live in Jesus! Lost in his Heart, drowned in love, small, small, small: simple, humble, sweet. Let us live of Jesus! Like children in his arms and on his Heart, holy and blameless under his gaze; immersed in the love of Jesus and of souls, in fidelity and obedience without limit to Him and to his Church! Let us live for Jesus! All and everything for Jesus, nothing outside of Jesus, nothing that is not Jesus, that does not lead to Jesus, that does not breathe Jesus! Worthy of the vocation we have received, molded on his Cross, on his sacrifice, on his obedience unto death in offering and total holocaust of ourselves, like the scent of a sweet odor.

Religious obedience is holy, because its foundation is God: its granite base is faith in Divine Providence: obedience sees and follows God. It consists in the habitual disposition to submit to the orders of one's superiors, as legitimate representatives of God, and interpreters of his will. And, for it to be called a virtue, it must be intelligent and free; and, for it to have merit, it is necessary that the will execute it as a sacred duty.

With obedience, we therefore offer to God the best part of

ourselves, the will and freedom, precious goods, which we consecrate to Christ and to the Church out of love; and it is such an offering that is worth and surpasses all others, so that the divine Scriptures say: Obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22).

OTHER TEXTS

In the New Wine in New Wineskins document, obedience and service to authority remain highly sensitive issues, also because cultures and models have undergone profound, unprecedented transformations, and, in some respects, perhaps even disconcerting ones for some. In the context in which we live, the same terminology of superiors and subjects is no longer adequate. What worked in a relational context of a hierarchical and authoritarian nature is no longer desirable or livable in the sensitivity of communion of our way of feeling and wanting to be Church. It must be borne in mind that true obedience cannot but prioritize obedience to God, both of authority and of those who obey, just as it cannot do without reference to Jesus' obedience; obedience which includes his cry of love My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Mt 27:46) and the silence of love of the Father.

Pope Francis makes an urgent appeal "to all the communities of the world [to] especially ask for a testimony of fraternal communion that becomes attractive and luminous. May all admire how you take care of each other, how you encourage each other and how you accompany each other."

Therefore, true obedience does not exclude, but rather requires,

that everyone manifest their conviction matured in discernment, even when this conviction does not coincide with what is asked by the superior. After which, if in the name of communion a brother or sister, even seeing better things, obeys voluntarily, then charitable obedience is practiced.

It is a widespread impression that, not infrequently, in the relationship between superior and subject, the evangelical basis of fraternity is lacking. Greater importance is given to the institution than to the people who compose it. It is no coincidence that among the main reasons for abandonment, according to the experience of this Congregation, are highlighted: the weakening of the vision of faith, conflicts in fraternal life, and weak fraternal life in humanity.

In reality, the way of leading the community by the superiors is well described by the Code when it says in the spirit of service ... they guide their subjects as children of God, arousing their voluntary obedience with respect for the human person ... they strive to build a fraternal community in Christ in which God is sought and loved above all things.

Charism and 4th vow

ORIONINE TEXTS

Work, seeking God alone

Yesterday, when I was in the room of a good priest my eyes fell on these words: God alone!

My look at that moment was full of weariness and pain, and my mind was thinking about so many other days like yesterday, full of anxiety, and above the whirl of so much anguish, and above the confused sound of so many sighs, I seemed to hear the amiable and good voice of my angel: God alone! disconsolate soul, God alone!

Above a window there was a cyclamen plant, further on was a corridor with a few priests piously meditating, and further still a crucifix, a dear and venerable crucifix which reminded me a fine, unforgettable years, and with my eyes filled with tears I ended up at the feet of the Lord. And my soul seemed to be lifted up, and a peaceful, comforting voice seemed to come down from that pierced heart, and it invited me to come up and confide my sorrows to God and to pray...

What a sweet silence, full of peace... and in the silence God alone!

I went on repeating to myself God alone!

And I seemed to feel a calm, beneficial atmosphere around my soul!...

And then I saw behind me the reason for my present difficulties: I saw that instead of trying to please God alone in my work, for years I had been begging praise from men, and I was continually seeking anxiously for someone to see, appreciate and applaud me; and I came to this conclusion: I must start a new life right here: to work, seeking God alone!

To work beneath the gaze of God, of God alone!

Oh! yes, a whole new rule of life is in these words, all that is needed for the Work of Divine Providence is here: the gaze of God!

It is necessary to restart a new life, and it must be restarted from here: to work, seeking God alone! To work beneath the gaze of God, of God alone!

The gaze of God is like dew which strengthens, like a shining beam of light which fertilises and expands: so, let us work without great noise and without respite; let us work in the sight of God, of God alone.

The human gaze is a scorching ray which turn colours pale, even the most resistant ones: in our case, it would be like an icy breath of wind which folds, bends and ruins the still tender stalk of this poor little plant.

Every action which is done to attract attention and to be seen, loses its freshness in the Lord's eyes: it is like a flower that has passed through many hands and is hardly presentable.

O poor Work of Divine Providence, be the desert flower which grows, opens and blooms because God has told it

to do so, and which is not upset if a passing bird notices it, or if the gusting wind disperses its scarcely formed leaves.

For our soul and for the whole of our life: God alone! God alone!

Solitude without God will rest the spirit, but embitter the heart: it is a fragrant, flower-covered plateau, but has nothing except a pale, lifeless sun.

Solitude with God, on the contrary, is a sweet, warm atmosphere which alone knows how to cure torments of the heart!

God alone! Oh! how useful and consoling it is to have only the will of God for a witness!

God alone, is sanctity at its highest level!

God alone, is the best founded security of one day entering Heaven.

God alone, my sons, God alone!

Autobiographical page,

From The Work of Divine Providence, 3/9/1899.

Serving in Men the Son of Man

. . . Let us open up a new divine world to many peoples, let us yield with loving sweetness in understanding the small, the poor and the humble.

May we always want to boil over with faith and charity.

May we always want to be holy, alive to others and dead to ourselves.

Our every word should be a breeze from the open skies: all people should feel the flame that burns in our hearts, and the light of our inner fire; finding there God and Christ.

Our devotion should not leave people cold and bored, for it must be truly and wholly alive and full of Christ.

We must thirst for martyrdom.

Serving in men the Son of man.

In order to conquer for God and to win others over, we need, first, to live are intense life of God within ourselves, to have inside us a dominating faith; a great ideal the denial of ourselves for others— should be the flame that burns and shines in us, setting our lives on fire in an idea and a sacred love which is stronger.

No one who serves two masters—the senses and the spirit—can ever discover the secret of winning souls.

We must say the words and perform the tasks that will outlive us.

Mortification of ourselves in silence and secret.

We must be saints, but we must be such saints that our saintliness does not limit itself to the faithful, nor remain only within the Church, but transcends and throws such a shining light, such a great life of love of God and man on society, that we are more than saints of the Church; we are saints of the people and saints of social wellbeing.

We must be a very deep vein of mystic spirituality that penetrates every social stratum: meditative and active spirits, 'servants of Christ and the poor'.

Do not give yourselves over to the vanity of letters, do not let yourselves swell up with worldly things.

Communicate with your brothers only to edify them, communicate with others only to spread the Lord's goodness.

(1) Love Christ in all men.

(2) Serve Christ in the poor.

(3) Renew Christ in us, and restore Christ in everything.

(4) Save, always save all people, save at the cost of every sacrifice, with redeeming passion and a redeeming holocaust.

The great souls, the great and magnanimous hearts, the strong and free Christian consciences, that feel their mission of truth, faith and great hope, of holy love of God and man, walk in the light of a great, great faith, 'that faith' in divine providence. They walk without stain, without fear, per ignem et acquam, through the filth of so much hypocrisy, so much perversity and dissolution.

Let us carry with us, and indeed inside us, that divine treasury that is God, and though we must go out among peoples, let us keep that heavenly silence in our hearts, a silence no earthly noise can interrupt, and the inviolate cell of the humble perception of ourselves, where the soul speaks to the angels and to Christ the Lord.

Around us there will be no shortage of scandal and the false shame of the scribes and Pharisees, nor of malevolent insinuations, nor of calumnies and persecution. My sons, we

should not have the time to 'turn our heads to guide the plough', for as much as our mission of charity drives and presses us, as much as our love of our neighbour burns within us, so much will the divine, scorching fire of Christ consume us. We are intoxicated with charity, fools of the Cross and Christ crucified.

Above all, in our humble, holy lives full of good, we must take the small and the poor into our charge, and follow God's path. We must live in a radiant sphere, intoxicated with light and the divine love of Christ and the poor, and of heavenly dew, like the lark that soars upward, singing in the sun.

Let our table be like the ancient Christian agape. Souls! Souls! Have great hearts and the divine folly of souls!

(from notes without precise date of 1939, cf. I.C., p. 324ff)

Being able to see and love nothing in the world but the souls of our brothers.

The souls of the small, the souls of the poor, the souls of sinners, the souls of the just, the souls of those astray, the souls of the penitent, the souls of those who rebel against God's will, the souls of those who rebel against Christ's Church, the souls of degenerate sons, the souls of unfortunate and perfidious priests, the souls that submit to grief, souls white as doves, the simple, pure and angelic souls of virgins, souls which have fallen into the darkness of the senses and the low bestiality of the flesh, souls proud of evil, souls greedy for power and gold,

souls full of themselves, souls that only see themselves, lost souls, looking for the way, grieving souls that seek shelter or a word of pity, souls that cry out in the desperation of condemnation, or souls intoxicated in their elation at the truth they have lived out: all these souls are loved by Christ, Christ died for all of them and Christ wants them all safe in his arms and his wounded heart.

Our lives and our entire Congregation must be a song and a holocaust of universal brotherhood in Christ. Seeing and feeling Christ in man. We must have in us the profound music of charity. For us the central point of the universe is Christ's Church, and that on which the Christian drama turns, the soul.

I feel nothing but an infinite, a divine symphony of spirits palpitating around the cross, and the cross exudes, drop by drop, across the centuries, the divine blood spilled for every human soul.

Christ cries out from the Cross 'I am thirsty'. It is a terrible sultry cry, not of the flesh, but the cry of thirst for souls, and it is for this thirst for our souls that Christ died.

I can see nothing but heaven, a truly divine heaven, because it is the heaven of salvation and true peace: I can see nothing but a kingdom of God, the kingdom of charity and pardon, where the whole crowd of peoples are the inheritance of Christ and the kingdom of Christ.

Perfect happiness cannot but be perfect dedication of self to God and men, to all men, to the most wretched as to the most morally and physically deformed, to the most distant, the guiltiest and the most adverse.

0 Lord, put me in the jaws of hell, so that I, by your mercy, may close them. May my secret martyrdom for the salvation of souls, of all souls, be my paradise, my supreme bliss. Love of souls, souls souls! I shall write my life in tears and blood.
May the injustices of men never weaken our full faith in God's goodness.
I am nourished and led forward by the breath of immortal and renewing hope.
Our charity is the sweetest folly of love for God and men, which is not of the earth.
Christ's charity is of such a sweetness and so unspeakable that the heart cannot think nor say, the eye not see, and the ear not hear.
Words ever aflame.
Suffering, silence, prayer, love, crucifixion and adoration.
Light and peace of heart
I shall climb my Calvary like the meek lamb.
Apostolate and martyrdom; martyrdom and apostolate.
Our souls and our words must be white, chaste, almost infantile, and they must bring to all men a breath of faith, goodness and comfort, which uplifts us towards heaven.
Let us keep our eyes and our hearts still in divine goodness.
Building Christ! Building always!
Petra autem est Christus!

Apostolate

Some questions for reflection:

- Is God truly at the center of my apostolate?

- Have I ever had to give up on some project or idea to which I was particularly attached? How did I react?

- Am I tied to personal protagonism or that of the Congregation, or am I open to the apostolate of the entire Church?

- Can I collaborate with my confreres, share with them the choices to be made?

- How much collaboration is there with the structures of the Diocese or other congregations?

ORIONINE TEXTS

To not know how to see and love in the world anything other than the souls of our brothers.

Souls of the little ones, souls of the poor, souls of sinners, souls of the righteous, souls of the misguided, souls of penitents, souls rebellious to the will of God, souls rebellious to the Holy Church of Christ, souls of degenerate children, souls of wretched and wicked priests, souls subjected to pain, souls white as doves, souls simple, pure, angelic souls of virgins, souls fallen into the darkness of sensuality and the base bestiality of the flesh, souls proud of evil, souls greedy for power and gold, souls full of themselves, seeing only themselves, lost souls seeking a way, sorrowful souls seeking refuge or a word of pity, souls screaming in the despair of condemnation,

or souls intoxicated by the intoxications of lived truth: all are loved by Christ, for all Christ died, all Christ wants saved in His arms and on His pierced Heart.

Our life and our entire Congregation must be a hymn together and a holocaust of universal brotherhood in Christ.

To see and feel Christ in man. We must have within us the deepest music of charity. For us, the central point of the universe is the Church of Christ and the fulcrum of the Christian drama, the soul.

I only feel an infinite, divine symphony of spirits, pulsating around the Cross, and the Cross drips drop by drop for us, through the centuries, the divine blood shed for each human soul.

From the Cross Christ cries "I thirst." Terrible cry of burning, which is not of the flesh, but is the cry of thirst for souls, and it is for this thirst of our souls that Christ dies.

I see only one heaven; a truly divine heaven, because it is the heaven of salvation and true peace: I see only one kingdom of God, the kingdom of charity and forgiveness where all the multitude of peoples is the inheritance of Christ and kingdom of Christ.

Perfect joy can only be found in perfect self-giving to God and to men, to all men, to the most wretched as to the most physically, morally deformed, to the farthest, to the most guilty, to the most adverse.

Place me, O Lord, at the mouth of hell, so that I, by your mercy, may close it.

May my secret martyrdom for the salvation of souls, for all souls, be my paradise and my supreme beatitude.

Love of souls, souls, souls! I will write my life with tears and with blood.

The injustice of men does not weaken our full confidence in the goodness of God.

I am nourished and led by the breath of immortal and renewing hopes.

Our charity is a sweet and crazy love of God and of men that is not of this earth.

The charity of Christ is of such sweetness and ineffable that the heart cannot think, nor speak, nor the eye see, nor the ear hear.

Words forever aflame. To suffer, to be silent, to pray, to love, to crucify oneself and to adore.

Light and peace of heart. I will ascend my Calvary as a gentle lamb.

Apostolate and martyrdom; martyrdom and apostolate.

Our souls and our words must be white, pure, almost childlike, and must bring to all a breath of faith, of goodness, of comfort that elevates towards Heaven.

Let us keep our eye and heart firmly in divine goodness.

Build Christ! Build always!

"Petra autem est Christus!"

(from the notes of February 25, 1939, cf. I.C., p. 328ff)

The soul, flooded by the goodness of the Lord and by his grace, inflamed by the fire of charity, soaring above, high, and overflowing with love, experiences a joy that is spiritual delight, and becomes both song and agony, a thirsty longing for the infinite, a desire for all

that is true, good, and beautiful: attraction, ever-increasing ardor for God: loving all in the One: in the Center the rays: in the Sun of suns every light.

And in this intoxicating light I strip myself of the old man and love: this love makes me a new man and in loving I sing, sing! I love ineffably and sing the same infinite Love and the holy Madonna of Divine Love and I soar to an immeasurable height, whence, with an immense cry of victory and glory to God and the Holy Virgin, I love and sing.

The splendor and divine ardor do not incinerate me, but temper, purify, and sublime me and expand my heart, so that I would like to gather in my little human arms all creatures to bring them to God.

And I would like to become spiritual food for my brothers who hunger and thirst for truth and for God; and I would like to clothe the naked with God, give the light of God to the blind and to those eager for greater light, open hearts to the innumerable human miseries and become a servant of servants by distributing my life to the most needy and destitute; I would like to become the fool of Christ and live and die in the folly of charity for my brothers!

To love always and to give life singing Love! Strip myself of everything! Sow charity along every path; sow God in all ways, in all furrows; always sink infinitely and soar infinitely higher, singing Jesus and the holy Madonna and never stop. Make the furrows luminous with God; become a good man among my brothers; always lower, stretch out hands and heart and gather dripping weaknesses and miseries and place them on the altar, so that in God they become the strength and greatness of God. Jesus died with open arms.

Charity! I want to sing Charity! Have great pity for all! Lord, write on my forehead and on my heart the sacred Tau of charity. Open my eyes and heart to the miseries of my brothers: let my life blaze, as in a towering fire, before You, O Jesus! Burning life! Make me a brazier, sparkling with light. Live by light. Kneeling with all my misery, I lay myself, groaning, before your mercy, O Lord, who died for us. Lord, I am not worthy, but I need your joy, a chaste joy, a joy that raptures, that carries us into peace, above ourselves and all things: immense joy! The soul has decided to overcome everything to ascend, to unite with God: it is the joy of humility.

Charity is hungry for action: it is an activity that tastes of the eternal and the divine. Charity cannot be idle. We die in God and live in God.

I feel like a burning coal on a great altar: to live in Him and He in us. This is the sublimity of life, the sublimity of death, the sublimity of love, the sublimity of joy, the sublimity of eternity!

(From a writing dated August 31, 1931; Don Orione in the light of Mary, 2164-2165)

"These times, as Cardinal Parrocchi wrote, understand charity only as a means and not as the end and the beginning. Tell the people of these times: souls that are lost must be saved, those who are ignorant of the principles of religion must be instructed, alms must be given for the love of God... and people do not understand." But the primary object of charity is souls, and souls cannot in any way live out this charity if they are not united to the Church and the Pope. Never before have the people been so detached from the Church and the Pope, and hence it is providential that this love has

awakened by all possible means so that the love of Jesus Christ may return to live in souls.

Man is what the idea he thinks and matures within himself, and his actions are always in accordance with the same idea by which he is guided. And therefore the more the love for the Pope and the Church is felt, in those who, for reasons of ministry, are teachers of the people, the more ardently will the flame that moves them in communicating this feeling to souls, without which no participation in supernatural life can occur; in this way the exercise of charity will perfectly achieve its corresponding purpose according to the needs of our times, which is precisely to bring society back to God by reuniting it with the Pope and the Church.

And wouldn't it seem that in God's designs this reunion finds a near preparation in the same social phenomenon of our days which tends towards universal brotherhood? We see charitable works and relief institutions springing up everywhere despite the class hatred that seems to want to disrupt every political, social, and family order; but nevertheless, the need for every hatred to be extinguished and love to return to lighten hearts is felt more strongly than ever. Well, when the Pope is recognized with a sense of faith as the universal father of the peoples, and the Church is once again the illuminating Teacher of minds with its infallible doctrine and returns to pulsate supernatural life in the hearts it emanates, serene and secure peace will reign in individuals and in society.

Therefore, that charity which is exercised in our society starting from the love for the Pope and the Church, and aiming at achieving this love in all, is precisely that which best meets the need of the times. And such is the spirit from which the Work of Divine Providence is informed, such is its physiognomy, its typical character: to restore all things in Christ!

What is the great secret to succeed in the works of apostolate, to achieve satisfactory results in our work? Every art has its secret. You, who go to school and have some notion of art, know that every school differs from another school. Raphael's school had a certain way of shaping figures, it had its secret; and so did Giotto's, Michelangelo's, Leonardo da Vinci's. And so you would also say of the commanders; each had and has his own secret to succeed, to win, to reach the top, to break the record...

Well, what is the secret to succeed in the apostolate of Christian education, in the field of Christian charity? I will teach you the secret tonight. This secret is: union with God, living with God, in God, united to God, always elevating the spirit to God. In other words, it is intense prayer, according to the definition of Saint Thomas: it is the great secret! Saint Thomas defines prayer as "elevation of the mind to God."

Prayer is the great means to succeed in everything that concerns our religious life; prayer is the great force that conquers everything, the great means to succeed quoad nos et quoad alios, to perfect

ourselves and to spread goodness in the souls of others.

Sufferance

Some questions to reflect on:

- In which area am I afraid of suffering? (Physical, being rejected, being judged, etc.)

- How do I react when I encounter a problem?

- How do I react when I am corrected, misunderstood, etc.?

- While looking at Jesus on the cross, have I ever desired to be more united with Him?

ORIONINE TEXTS

Suffering, raised up, lowered, useful for something or useless to all, I will always adore you and will always be yours, O my God! No one will detach me from You! In joys and sorrows, I will always be Yours, O my sweetest love Jesus! Lonely and ignored, like the flower of the desert, wandering like the bird without a nest, always, always, Lord and sweetest Love of my soul, from my lips will come the submissive word of her whom you have given me for a Mother: Fiat! Fiat! Let it be done to me according to your word!

Blessed are those who have understood well the necessity of doing penance! Blessed are those who have renounced everything to live in prayer and penance. Blessed are those who suffer for God. The pains of life are given to us to do penance, they are calls to a better life, woe to man if he had nothing to suffer! Illness, adversities, pains

serve to humble his pride; if they weren't there, he would rise up against God. How many proud, arrogant souls have returned to God after great pain, after serious illness! Let us do penance, and thank God for the pains and evils He sends us.

Dear Jesus, today I want a gift from You: - give me your thorns, that I may crown your heart; I need to suffer so much to live through your pains, and in pain release your love! ... let a great voice of love come out of every thorn wound! O my Lord, how sweet you are, how sweet it is to love you! Ah, I feel you now, I feel that you love me. Oh what flame, what light, oh what life of love you are! Ah Lord, the thorns are too few; come, O Crucified Jesus, come, O Jesus love, come, and pierce your cross into my heart, I want to languish over your wounds, I want to die of love on the wounds of your pierced heart! If the earth ever knew the happiness that is in loving you! ... Oh! come then, O Lord, come, that I will never leave you again! Let the world put up barriers: they will serve me as a ladder to fly into your arms. The storms of passion will, blowing, make my flame brighter. O flowers, O stars, O angels, - come, sing the eternal hymn of love: say: - O great and good God! O holy love! O Love! Love!

To restore all things in Christ: it is necessary to make man and the people Christian, a Christian and social restoration of humanity is necessary. But it is necessary to educate youth more and more to God and go to the people, live their life, suffer their sufferings. And in this hour of the world, so painful, so sad, let us resolve, O Friends, to keep the sacred fire of love for Christ and men unextinguished and

ever more blazing. And let us realize charity, especially by extending fraternally the hand and heart to the proletarian classes, to the poor workers, to the humblest and most unhappy. Let us spread this life-giving Christian love among the people, the youth, and the country. Without this sacred fire, which is love and light, what would remain of humanity? The intelligence obscured, the heart made colder, colder than the marble of a tomb, humanity would live convulsed by pains of every kind without any high comfort, only abandoned to betrayals, vices, nameless wickedness.

Our charity is a sweet and mad love of God and men that is not of the earth. The charity of Christ is of such sweetness and ineffable that the heart cannot think, nor say, nor the eye see, nor the ear hear. Words always aflame. To suffer, to be silent, to pray, to love, to crucify oneself, and to adore. Light and peace of heart. I will climb my Calvary like a gentle lamb. Apostolate and martyrdom; martyrdom and apostolate.

My children, the Lord is close to you; He is close to all who love Him, who desire to love Him. He is close to you and takes into account all your moral and physical pain; and He puts all your sorrows in the maternal hands of the Holy Madonna, who removes from you the defects, the dross of your weaknesses, your deficiencies, and then offers them again, your pains, to Jesus, in reparation for us and for our brothers, for the salvation of thousands and thousands of souls, every day and every hour, and for as many souls who suffer and atone down there, in the second kingdom, longing to throw

themselves on the Heart of Our Lord. Come on, courage, dear children! And be even happy to suffer: you suffer with Jesus Crucified and with the Church; you cannot do anything dearer to the Lord and the Blessed Virgin; be happy to suffer and to give life in the love of Jesus Christ.

Until the end.

Some questions for reflection:

- How did I feel during this spiritual exercises course?
- What reflection inspired me the most?
- Was there any reflection that disturbed me?
- What will change in my life now that I'm going back home?

Pope Francis (Gaudete et Exsultate, 129-130):

"At the same time, holiness is frankness: it is audacity, it is an evangelizing impetus that leaves a mark in this world. For this to be possible, Jesus himself comes to meet us and repeats with serenity and firmness: 'Do not be afraid' (Mk 6:50). 'And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age' (Mt 28:20). These words allow us to walk and serve with that courageous attitude that the Holy Spirit aroused in the Apostles, urging them to proclaim Jesus Christ. Boldness, enthusiasm, speaking with freedom, apostolic fervor, all this is included in the word frankness, a word with which the Bible also expresses the freedom of an existence that is open, because it is available for God and for brothers (cf. Acts 4:29; 9:28; 28:31; 2 Cor 3:12; Eph 3:12; Heb 3:6; 10:19)."

Orionine Texts:

To the Bishop:

"Do not fear that I take too much precedence in Tortona: Your Excellency knows, O my good Father, that we have never interfered

in the government of the Diocese, neither directly nor indirectly; only when Your Excellency spoke to me of some of your pain, I tried to give you some comfort. Your Excellency, with that filial love with which I have always loved and served you, I humbly implore you in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Madonna not to want to die like this. You know that attempts have been made to cover me with mud, and with what mud! For four years I have been waiting for a word from my Bishop in my defense: calumny has spread so much in the Diocese and outside, that even my Clerics know it! How Priests and lay people have talked about it. I have always kept silent, I have always suffered and prayed, but I am not a stone or a rock [:] it is about the good name, and what a good name a Priest must hold dear: his honor. We have turned to our Church and our Bishop... I have never asked for trials: I do not wish ill on anyone, but the good of all: forgiveness to all, I would like to give my life for all. In prayer, in silence and in hope I have patiently awaited and with full confidence as a son a word from my Bishop and Father, which said: it is not true: from my Church of Tortona, which I have always loved and served as one loves a Mother: the word has not come. O my good Father, do not want to die like this!.

To Don Sterpi:

"This Visit is and we must consider it as an extraordinary grace from the Lord, as much as it may have been provoked by appeals, which were not, until today, communicated to me, by persons not well affected to the Little Work, or hostile to me personally. - And it was expected that I was away. - It is time that I have known about this

whirlwind, and when, almost two years ago, I left Italy, I threw myself into the sea a bit like Jonah, and I always hoped that my absence would calm the storm, and leave the poor boat of the Congregation in peace. I sought work here, my dear priests also to have a reason to delay my return, and justify not only in the eyes of the people, but also in your eyes, my absence, not to make you suffer, keeping you in the dark about certain of my painful sufferings, especially - personal ones. I hoped, above all, that, not seeing me, they would calm down. - It seems that it is not so, and patience, my children, let us take everything from the holy hand of God, and forward in the Lord! Let us not grieve, but let us love the Lord and the holy church more. Let us bless the Lord, in everything and for everything that God will want to dispose or allow: surely it will all be for our good. Let us love the Lord in friends and let us love him in enemies, small or large let us pray for all and for those who make us suffer: let us always adore him in silence and in hope and in great love, even if they were to gouge out our eyes, as long as they leave us our hearts to love them."

To Abbot Caronti:

"If I knew I was staying here, I would ask you to go to Chaco to die there, that is, to consume myself and live as a true Missionary, entrusted to the Lord. [...]. I have a desire: to love the Lord and to love the Holy Church, souls, poor children, abandoned ones, the poor class, workers, communists: I would like to die for these my brothers, and I would like to be forgotten by all, to live and die forgotten by all, under everyone's feet, and only love Jesus, the Holy

Church and all, and lose myself in the Lord: - I, most unworthy, who have sinned so much, who have been so bad with the Lord and the Madonna, and have not treasured the gifts of the Lord! - Help me, dear visiting father, help me!!"

APPENDIX 2

The two faces of our Charism

Catecheses on the two fourth vows of the PSMC and FDP.

APPENDIX 3

THE MASSES

Holy Mass 1: Discovering Vocation with Mary and Joseph (Mt 1:18-25)

"*This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the

name Jesus."

The Gospel I have chosen for today leads us to reflect on some moments that Mary had to share with Joseph, her spouse, in carrying out their mission as "Parents" - educators of Jesus. I don't want to speak so much about the honor bestowed on both of them by God in choosing them, but rather about their human part, about their humble service to God, and how they felt as "humans".

I imagine Mary as a young girl, 15-16 years old, quiet, hardworking, always at home, except when she has to go to the well to fetch water. According to the customs of the time and religion, she accepts to be promised in marriage, to start a family, even though in her heart she has the secret desire to be solely for God and remain a virgin.

Joseph, I imagine him as a devout young man, a good believer, a good worker, a good friend. Like all young people of his time, he must have had plans for his life: to start a family, have children, develop his work, have a quiet life. Everything seemed to be going well, he had managed to get engaged to the best, sweetest, most docile girl in the village: Mary.

Marriage, in Jesus' time, was celebrated in two stages. The first involved a contract between the two families that the spouses accepted and signed. From that moment on, the two were husband and wife but did not live together for at least a year, first of all because they were young and their respective parents had to instruct them in family duties, but also because the two families had to get to know each other better and ensure that things would go

well between them. After about a year, the two could live together. In this first year, the contract could still be dissolved and everyone would understand that the problem was that the two families either could not find a satisfactory agreement or had seen that the choice was wrong. Nothing shameful. So the two could talk to each other and start planning their lives. This is when Joseph learns that Mary accepts marriage but wants to remain a virgin: So, what kind of family will it be without children? Then suddenly there is Mary's unexpected pregnancy, so there will be a child, but not his child and moreover, according to Mary, he will be the Son of God. He, a "righteous" man, as the Gospel calls him, finds himself facing the greatest dilemma of his life. Here we must be careful about a very common but wrong idea that many Christians have. Joseph is certainly not distressed by the doubt that Mary has been unfaithful. The most logical thing is to think that, since the two were already effectively married, met, and talked, he knew from the beginning from Mary that the child had been conceived in her by God. Joseph is called a "righteous man," which means he is a man who wants to do only the will of God and obey the law, but he does not know and cannot understand what God wants from him. There are many aspects that discourage him: the holiness of God is something to be feared; there is the absolute prohibition to see and touch Him, but he must welcome Him into his home; there is also the law that says that he should officially declare that the child is not his, but no one would believe the story of a divine pregnancy. So he decides to divorce Mary quietly. How could this fact remain secret since everyone could see that Mary was pregnant? He simply does not want to expose her to public spectacle, to expose before all a

problem that he cannot solve. So the right word is not "divorce her", but "set her free". "I set my wife free because I do not know where to put myself, I do not know what God wants from me; He, the Almighty, will take care of the situation". As a man, according to the law, he does not need to give others the reasons for his divorce. So Joseph does not doubt Mary, but doubts himself, his ability to take on this responsibility. "If God has different plans, let His will be done and I, a weak and unworthy man, step aside." Instead, no, the angel says: "God needs you. You must give this child a name, protect him, give him an education, prepare him for his great mission". As a good dad, he will have started to tidy up the house, as a good carpenter to prepare a crib, while Mary, besides taking care of her health to avoid unnecessary risks to the baby, will have started to prepare some clothes, plan something. Instead, they have to leave everything and go on a dangerous and tiring journey that could jeopardize the baby's birth and the mother's health. In Bethlehem, the city of Joseph's ancestors, of his relatives, there should be a safe place for them; instead, no one wants to take responsibility for and commit to welcoming a woman who has already reached the time of childbirth. Rejected by those who should help them, they are still alone and have to settle for a stable. But they are not alone, shepherds begin to arrive to visit Jesus and they talk about extraordinary events like angels who announced the coming of the Savior. The shepherds will have admired the baby, congratulated the mother, and perhaps looked disdainfully at Joseph: "Are you the father? Aren't you ashamed? Is this all you can offer your wife and son? What's wrong, can't you work that you can't even offer a house?". The fame of this birth grows and even strange and

important people like the Magi arrive and finally even King Herod seems interested, but to kill them and it is again up to Joseph to oppose the king and save "his" family. They have to go down to Egypt, a country they do not know the language, the traditions, where they have no support, where there is no true religion. They have to educate this child without the help of the synagogue, the elders, the relatives.

Those who entrust themselves to God with simplicity must accept His plans, but above all must accept that they will always be unworthy instruments. Their greatness lies precisely here, in being able to give up their ideas and plans to make room for God's ideas and plans.

Then they return to Nazareth and resume the quiet life of a carpenter's family. At some point Joseph disappears to make room for Jesus, to allow the intimacy between mother and son to grow. Mary is important because she will have a mission to fulfill even after the death of Jesus, so it is right that she spends more time with Him.

This is the message I want to leave you with today: the two greatest people in the history of salvation have shown their greatness in humility, in availability, in the ability to adapt, to change their minds, to give up their own plans.

Holy Mass 2: "Do not lose anything of what it has been entrusted to you" (Jn 6:35-40)

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.

But I told you that although you have seen [me], you do not believe.

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me.

And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it [on] the last day.

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him [on] the last day."

How great is the God of Jesus! How different from the poor copy that we sometimes make of Him! Jesus, in an intense and dramatic moment of his ministry, reveals once and for all, the true face of God. Jesus is fresh from the most striking miracle, the multiplication of the loaves, and perhaps this can be considered the peak of his popularity, in fact they want to make him king. He realizes that this

crowd is driven only by material needs, not yet capable of making the leap to transcendent spiritual reality, so he begins the great discourse of the "bread of life," from which today's passage is taken. While trying to convince the crowd to seek God not for the bread that only nourishes the body, but for what fills the heart, he reveals a God who has nothing to do with the supreme, aseptic, and amorphous being who scrutinizes the destinies of the world from above, but who is a very tender and discreet Father who has only one desire, that his children may have the fullness of life, the eternal life. Eternal life is the life of the Eternal, the life of the God that gives our small lives dimensions and breath of immortality. The crowd seeks God for benefits, protection, and help. They had followed Jesus with the illusion that with Him no problem would ruin their lives anymore, they would have food and wealth in abundance. Jesus, on the other hand, proposes to them to look up to see that the God who gave manna to the people of Israel has given them much more: the freedom to be children, the absolute dignity of being human.

Something similar had also happened to the Samaritan woman: she had asked Jesus to give her the living water that he had promised, and Jesus responded by making her reflect on how empty her daily life was, how far from happiness she was.

And us? Every day the Lord offers us the bread of life of his body and the living water which is his word because he wants none of us to be lost, yet so often we only seek the bread and water of the earth to fill our stomach.

There is another passage from the Gospel that we should always

keep in mind as we do apostolate: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Mt 6:33).

Today so many people no longer know what they need, they have lost the taste for spiritual things, they feel the emptiness inside themselves, but they don't know why, and they try to fill this void with material things. We meet them because very often they come to our institutions asking for bread, medicine, education: what do we offer them? It is easy to fall into the temptation of being satisfied only by taking care of material needs and ignoring spiritual ones. We usually use respect for others' consciences as a justification for our negligence; in fact, it can happen that many of these people, when they hear us talking about God, tell us that they are not interested. This is just the first emotional external reaction; what they see in us will remain in their minds, and if it was something believable, they will come back precisely to seek what they cannot find anywhere else. The world thirsts for spirituality but does not know what to call it by name, so it seeks culture, political ideology, fame, esoteric experience, or the practice of Eastern spiritualities. It feels the need for inner peace and knows that material things cannot give it.

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Holy Mass 3: The mission of the disciples (*Lc. 10:1-12.17-20*)

After this the Lord appointed seventy[-two] others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit.

He said to them, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.

Go on your way; behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves.

Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals; and greet no one along the way.

Into whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household.'

If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you.

Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you, for the laborer deserves his payment. Do not move about from one house to another.

Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God is at hand for you'.

Whatever town you enter and they do not receive you, go out into the streets and say, 'The dust of your town that clings to our feet, even that we shake off against you.' Yet know this: the kingdom of God is at hand. I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom on that day than for that town.

…

The seventy[-two] returned rejoicing, and said, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name."

Jesus said, "I have observed Satan fall like lightning" from the sky.

Behold, I have given you the power to tread upon serpents and scorpions and upon the full force of the enemy and nothing will harm you.

Nevertheless, do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven."

Today, the gospel may seem quite calm, yet it hides an important message for all of us. When you have the chance to pick up a Bible, compare the beginning of chapter 9 of the Gospel of Luke with the beginning of chapter 10, which is today's gospel. You will notice that the two pages are almost identical except that in chapter 9, it says that Jesus sends the twelve apostles, whereas here he sends another 72. Why does Jesus immediately feel the need to send others, and especially why does Luke feel the need to repeat this just one chapter later? To make us understand that if the mission of preaching the Kingdom of God was primarily a duty of the apostles, and today we could say of priests or religious, yet Jesus now gives the same mission with the same powers to all his disciples, that is, all Christians, including you. This is evident from the symbolic number used: 72 = 12 multiplied by the half of 12, which is all the tribes of Israel.

It can be seen also in the phrase with which Jesus begins his

mandate: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." So, priests are not enough, therefore all of you, first of all, "pray to the Lord to send more laborers," but then roll up your sleeves and also make an effort to preach.

The characteristics of the mission are very similar in both cases; let's see some of them.

- Jesus calls; He had many disciples, that is, people who came to him to hear what he said. They were all people who appreciated him, who were willing to make sacrifices for him, such as walking for days, setting aside work commitments, and so on. Well, among these disciples he chooses 72. The number refers to the structure of the people of Israel to whom he sends them. So even though the number 72 indicates that we are all called, the emphasis remains that each of us is "chosen" by God. He makes proposals open to all, but each must contribute to the Kingdom in a different way. These 72 have the task of announcing.

- As of the moment, their mission is limited in time. The purpose that Jesus has in mind is to train them, and it is in service of the imminent visit that Jesus will make to those villages. The true mission of the apostles will come only after Pentecost. However, the purpose of any form of apostolate or witness that we do is always to prepare people to personally encounter the Lord.

- The main duties of the apostle are: to attract others to follow Christ (pray that the Master sends other workers into the harvest), and to proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

- Social activities are an important part of the mission. This is not seen in the recommendations made by Jesus at the beginning, but it

is seen when they return, when they recount the miracles they were able to perform, miracles mainly related to defeating the presence of the Devil. Jesus himself says: "I have given you power."

- Apostolate will not make the disciple rich or successful; in fact, the purpose of the work is to be in communion with God (rejoice that your names are written in heaven). On the other hand, to be apostles, there is no need to be rich, but to trust in Providence.

- Jesus then invites the disciples to collaborate with people, to use their help, but also to be careful in choosing whom to collaborate with.

- He says that entering a house, make the offer of peace; if people accept, stay with them, if not, leave without hesitation. Everything the apostle says or does should be done in a way that brings peace, but it is up to each of them to accept or not accept this gift.

At the end of the Gospel, there is an interesting thing. When the disciples return and report the miracles they were able to perform, in a sense Jesus praises them, but then immediately adds: "But do not rejoice because Satan has submitted to you, rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven." Our apostolate, our preaching, must not be aimed at success but at our union with the Lord. Those who benefit in the end are the people we serve, but above all, it is us because we have the opportunity to be united with the Lord. We do good for the Lord, not for the people, in fact, we do it even for those who do not deserve it and do not thank us because it is the Lord we seek.

What can we expect when we work for the Lord?

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves." Apostolate is never

easy and never safe. So: difficulties are never a reason to refuse or interrupt apostolate.

Persecutions are not in contradiction with witness, but are its highest moment. The assistance of the Holy Spirit is a fact that cannot be denied, and moments of persecution are the moments when he works the most.

Misunderstandings and refusals can also come from people who in theory should be closer to us or on our side. It is painful to accept this, but we must have the conscience of working for the Lord and following his teachings.

Holy Mass 4: No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (Jn 15: 12-17)

This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.
No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.
You are my friends if you do what I command you.
I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.
It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.
This I command you: love one another.

Jesus attributes the "greatest" love to friends, which seems to contradict what we often study about selfless love, reaching out to the distant, and loving one's enemies: "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:44-45). So which love is greater: that for friends or that for enemies?
Before answering, I would like to pose another delicate question: can we truly love our enemies? Understand me well, because I do not want to go against the Lord's commandment; so, to clarify my point, I ask you a third question: who is an enemy? An enemy is someone against whom I fight. If I fight,

I do not love, but if I love them, they are no longer enemies. Here is the key to understanding Jesus' statement and also to love prophetically: transform your enemies into friends. Jesus had no enemies, except the devil; he forgave, redeemed all others, and died for them. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." We are all his friends, part of his family, and for all of us he gave his life. If he had died for us without loving us, his sacrifice would have been in vain. Sometimes people make me smile when they come for confession and say, "I try to forgive that person, but I can't forget what he did to me." I always respond: "Thank God you can't forget, otherwise you couldn't forgive." Forgetting is a selfish act, you want to erase a person from your life, from your memory, how can you love them then?

The English language has an interesting play on words: "forgetting" is "For-get" (to receive), it's selfish; "forgiving" is "for-give" (to give), it's true love. You must remember what happened and purify it with the blood of Christ, hand it over to him on the cross and say to Jesus, "If this makes me suffer, then I want to suffer on the cross with you, so, Lord, I forgive him as you forgave those who crucified you."

Let's ask ourselves: do I truly love everyone or is there someone I try to avoid, someone who makes me feel sad every time I think of them? Whatever has happened in our lives, no matter how ugly or painful, it carries some grace from the Lord. Trials and persecutions, can teach us a lot, but only when we review those moments with love will we be able to reap the fruits of

those graces. If we look at those moments with resentment, or desire for revenge, we deepen our wounds and increase the pain. "*When one lives in this spirit, one always puts others before oneself, happy to serve the Lord and brothers, men, all men without distinction and with diligence, with fervor, with gentle joy, expecting nothing but the rewards of heavenly hope. Let us love one another: whoever loves his neighbor fulfills the law. Indeed, charity not only perfectly fulfills the law, but exhausts it with a perfection that conquers and surpasses it."* (writing 80,279)

"We must forgive and forgive, everything to everyone. You must cover with a mountain of blessings not only those who do good to you, but also all those who do you harm." (from a sermon on 23/06/1929).

Holy Mass 5: Who will separate us from the love of Christ? (Rm8: 31-39)

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?
He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?
Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us.
Who will condemn? It is Christ [Jesus] who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.
What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?
As it is written:

> *"For your sake we are being slain all the day;*
> *we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered."*

No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us.
For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Saint Paul has some surprising expressions about love. We all know well the hymn to love of 1 Corinthians 13; instead, I have chosen for our reflection chapter 8 of the letter to the Romans, which in my opinion is an equally powerful text. The entire letter to the Romans concerns the problem of the relationship between the Law and the

Spirit. Chapter 8 represents a peak in the world of religious and spiritual literature. In the first seven chapters, Paul makes an intellectual and theological effort to explain to his readers that human nature is enslaved by its frailty, but is also enslaved by the structure that the Jews had built with the law. It should have helped them find God, but instead, it had trapped them in a series of rites that had cooled their hearts and numbed their will. Chapter 7 had its highest point in the statement: "*I cannot understand even what I do: for I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate ... For I agree in my inner self with the law of God, but in my body, I see another law that wages war against the law of my mind and makes me a slave to the law of sin that is in my members. I am wretched! Who will deliver me from this body doomed to death*?" These are very strong and pessimistic phrases that seem to come from a desperate heart and yet are the preparation for the leap of faith, of joy, of the solution to all problems. Now Paul indulges in poetry, as if suddenly he found himself liberated and immersed in a new, beautiful, and serene world. The chapter opens immediately with a peremptory statement: "*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ... What was impossible for the law, God made it possible by sending his Son in a body like that of sin*." Once we have been conquered by Jesus, our destiny is adoption as sons: we are brothers of the Son, invited to sit at God's own table. All those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. It is within our misery that redemption and filiation find the ground where they take shape. This can happen because "*If we truly accept to share in His sufferings, we will be able to share in His Glory*". At this point, we must be silent and listen carefully, and we will be able to hear the groaning of those

who, around us, suffer because of the current situation. The arrival of sin in the world has produced destruction and suffering throughout creation, and if we listen attentively, we can hear 3 types of "groaning", 3 expressions of this suffering. By whom are they produced? First of all, from nature, from creation. Nature, as if it were a person, has been subjected to man since the moment of creation, it is distorted and suffers from the beginning because of man's sin, enslaved by his whims, devastated, polluted, and made sterile by selfishness. Man acts like a dictator, despising the original plan of creation and breaking the harmony of creation. It continues to deteriorate, and it groans, but it does not resign itself because it has something to look forward to, and it retains the hope that a new era will open up, the time when man will be freed from this condition of sin and then she too will be liberated. Creation, on the day of glory, where in man the image of the Son of God will be visible, will have its share of glory and freedom: it will vibrate in unison with the glory of man, in a way that remains mysterious to us. So, creation groans, not out of despair, but out of impatience, or rather, because of the birth pangs, as Saint Paul calls them, because it knows, it feels, that its slavery will cease and that its pains give birth to a different world, truly made for man in friendship with God. The second groaning is that of man. The more he immerses himself in the noise of the wild and unrestrained life that seems to guarantee him joy and power, the more he feels inwardly empty, he realizes that these external things do not satisfy him. They are temporary, fleeting, unstable, and deceptive, while he is made for something higher, eternal. Then his groaning is that of one who calls for liberation from the transience and slavery of sin, knowing that all this is possible in

Christ. Here we find the famous phrase: "*In hope we have been saved*"; it provided the inspiration for Pope Benedict's encyclical: "Spe Salvi". God, with His grace, has allowed us to experience, at least in part, the beatitude to which we are destined, so ours is a groaning of impatience, of waiting for adoption as Sons to be fully realized in us. But we also have a third groaning and this is the groaning of God himself, or rather of his Spirit. Does God suffer? Physically no, but He is a Father, a loving father who sees the suffering of his children and cannot wait to free them to be able to embrace them fully again. The distance caused by our weakness is insurmountable for us, but "*The Spirit of God comes to the aid of our weakness. Alone, we do not even know what to ask for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with insistences, with unexpressed groans*". Here everything is poetry, we seem to be able to see the kneeling man, who with shame stammers some words of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit whispering in the Father's ear something that only they can fully understand, a language still too distant from us limited by selfishness, but which fully expresses the nature of God himself, his being Love. And here begins the second part of the chapter, the hymn of Christ's love. Just as the Spirit does not abandon us in our ignorance and intercedes on our behalf, so Christ does not abandon us in our sin and intercedes for us. So here are the words: "*We know that God makes everything work together for the good of those who love him*". Without a doubt, difficulties and problems are connected with our mistakes and our incapacity, but we can never doubt the healing action of God in every situation. Our elders used to say that God knows how to write straight on crooked lines. Trials and suffering purify us, make many of our false securities fall; mistakes

make us humble; losses make us understand what are the important things. None of Christ's sufferings was lost, so it is with us, if lived in Christ. Now we have a song of liberation. We know various ones in the Bible. In the book of Exodus, we have the song of the people of Israel proclaimed after passing through the Red Sea and seeing their enemies overwhelmed by the waters; then we have Psalm 125: "The Lord has done great things for us", perhaps written to celebrate the return from the slavery of Babylon. This one from the letter to the Romans, however, represents the highest point, because the liberation we obtain in Christ is the definitive one. "*If God is with us, who can be against us*?". Let us not forget that God gave His Son to us, how could He deny us anything else we need?

The language used by Paul, besides being highly poetic, is inspired by legal language. We are on trial and we are talking about judgment and condemnation. For centuries we have represented God as a judge who sends the wicked to hell because of their sins and the righteous to heaven for their good deeds. Paul's perspective is very different: God is the one who justifies, who gives everything. The judge is Jesus, and He judges from the cross. Can He possibly condemn those to save whom He died? He who intercedes for us and justifies, can He possibly accuse? "*In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us*."

"*Who will separate us from the love that God has for us*?" Here Paul makes a list of problems and difficulties, situations that he himself experienced in his apostolate and that we will also experience in our lives if we follow the Lord with sincerity and courage. They cannot diminish the love that God has for us. If I am sick, it does not mean that God loves me less.

It is interesting to see how this list is composed entirely of external things; indeed, it is only our lack of faith that can weaken our fervor, only we can harm ourselves.

Then, as if to give more strength to his statement, he repeats the list of possible obstacles that we will encounter on our way to union with God, and this time he also includes positive things: life, angels, powers, etc. because everything can become an obstacle and temptation if opposed to God.

Today many people face the same problem: outwardly they seem obedient, but then they feel unable to control the strong impulses of their emotions and instincts. Therefore, today we can witness an increase in selfishness, individualism, apathy and laziness. People, normally, do not fall into "major" sins, they do not go against any of the Ten Commandments, but they lack spirituality, an inner desire to know the true value of things and actions, they do not feel the need to be guided by the commandment of love.

Many religious, despite living the three vows, face a subtle challenge. It can easily be said that they have never committed any sins against them, but at the same time, they have never lived them as a true consecrated person should.

It is also true that if a person takes seriously the challenges posed by the commandment of love and their vocation, they will surely have to face struggles, renunciations, oppositions, and sometimes even persecutions.

We know the Gospel page about Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' inner spiritual struggle, which is also manifested physically, derives from the confrontation between the desire to be

faithful to His mission and the many emotions that He felt as every human being. He knew he would die and was afraid of it; he strongly desired to remain here on earth to continue his work; he probably also felt doubt about failing in his mission. Surely in that moment of prayer in the garden, all these ideas passed through His mind. In the end, it is His love for the Father that allows Him to perform the last supreme act of obedience and to accept the idea that the project must continue.

Here is the meaning of Paul's words:

"*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written: For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. But in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*."

From the baseness of the world and its fragility, described in the first chapters, we have risen to the summit of the Trinity. We followers of Christ must focus on this and allow this infinite love to enter and fill our hearts. If we are filled with the love of God, "EVERYTHING" will go for the better, if, instead, we detach ourselves from Him and go on our own, "EVERYTHING" will become an obstacle.

Holy Mass 6: We have a treasure in clay pots. (2Cor 4:7-18)

But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.
We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body.
For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.
So, death is at work in us, but life in you.
Since, then, we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed, therefore I spoke," we too believe and therefore speak, knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in his presence.
Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.
Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.
For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal.

Once I read an article about the final greeting of the Mass: "The Mass is ended, go in peace," which is meant to be the translation of "ite missa est." The author explained that in the old times, the priest

would keep part of the consecrated bread and after the Mass, he would entrust it to the people to take to those who could not attend Mass because they were sick. The word "Missa" comes from the root of "mittere," "to send," like a mission. So, the priest meant to say: "Now that the celebration is over, go because the mission begins." So today I would like to say: only the first part of the retreat is over, now go and do the second part, the practical one. Go with the mission of translating what you have understood into daily life.

We have heard Saint Paul say that we have a treasure in earthen vessels. Indeed, our life and our vocation are such treasures. I hope that these days of prayer have provided you with a treasure of reflections, inspirations, resolutions, and the desire for holiness. But this treasure is in containers that are easy to break: our human nature, our personality, our weaknesses, and deficiencies. These vessels are threatened by the routine of our life, by the demands of apostolate, by the opposition of society.

You are doing a great job. What I wanted to do in these days was to give you some tools to make your life more fruitful, with the fruits that come from the grace of God. The Lord has chosen you for a purpose and this purpose must be the engine of your life. The Lord wants to renew this society and make it more and more His, and to do so He has chosen you, but true renewal must begin from within. We will be able to change others if we have the courage to change ourselves. Never create division or opposition between prayer and apostolate, spiritual life, and apostolic life. If you feel that there is sometimes incompatibility between the two, then it means that you are focusing in the wrong direction, that your approach to daily activities must be changed.

Always remember that we are in the service of God's plan, not ourselves; He is the main actor, we are the disciples and as he said: "No disciple is greater than his master" (John 13:16).

Do not be afraid of difficulties, especially spiritual ones, and remember the words of the Gospel: "If you want to be my follower, take up your cross and follow me."

Perhaps yesterday's topic was sad: suffering. Now I want to turn it into joyous with the words of Don Orione: "The last to win is always Jesus Christ and Jesus wins through his love." We are called to be witnesses in a world full of suffering and destruction, but what we witness through our apostolate is the risen Lord. We live in a world that has lost the sense of hope and through our vows, we must remind people of the eternal life to which we are all destined. We live in a world hardened by greed, power, lust, and we are called to be stumbling blocks to make those who do not follow the gospel realize their mistakes. We live in a world that seeks pleasure, amusement, and satisfaction; we are called to be witnesses of deep, inner, eternal joy.

So do not be afraid to go into the desert, but always return decisively and courageously to the market square. Do not be afraid to climb the mountain of Calvary but then come down to the city and proclaim the resurrection. Do not be afraid to love people, but give them the love of the Lord, not just yours, and be ready to hand them over to the Lord to set them free.